Understanding the Public Response: A Strategic Narrative Perspective on France's Sahelian Operations

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Strategic narratives now face unrealistic expectations as to what they can achieve in the military field. This article asks when and how such narratives lose traction during protracted military interventions. To address these questions, which are crucial at a time when so much modern warfare takes place in the 'fourth' dimension, this study develops a conceptual framework that focuses initially on the weakening of a narrative's content and, subsequently, on its loss of normative resonance and verisimilitude. The latter two factors are beyond the control of even the most skilful strategic narrator, particularly where narratives are required to appeal to audiences with different norms. Our framework is applied to the case of France's military operations in Mali (Serval) and the Western Sahel (Barkhane). It finds that, whereas France's compelling Serval narrative was congruent with strong French and Malian public backing, its Barkhane narrative weakened over time, resonating less with prevailing societal norms, becoming less attuned to events on the ground and ultimately coinciding with a sharp decline in public support in France and Mali. It concludes that strategic narratives afford agency to policymakers but are constantly open to contestation and struggle to cope with diverse audiences and deteriorating 'evenemential' contexts.

Lawrence Freedman introduced the concept of strategic narratives to security studies, defining these as 'compelling storylines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn' (Freedman, 2006, p. 22). Yet, a decade later, Freedman (2015, p. 22) noted how '[t]he idea of a strategic narrative is now being used in a variety of different ways, one consequence of which may be to encourage unrealistic expectations of what might be achieved by attempts to get the "narrative" right'.

This article examines what strategic narratives might be expected to achieve and identifies when and how they lose traction during protracted military interventions of the kind deployed by France over the last eight years in the Sahel. Understandably, strategic narrative scholars have underscored the strengths of narratives and contended that they offer policymakers 'a crucial form of strategic agency' (Antoniades *et al*, 2010, p.6). In the military field, they have pointed to the ways in which 'policymakers can shape public opinion during times of war' and are 'not just windsocks reacting to the will of a volatile electorate' (Graaf et al, 2015, p. 4).

They have equally shown how strong narratives 'about the why-what-and-how of overseas military missions' affect the 'public's willingness to tolerate the cost of deploying military power' (Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011, p. 505), thereby helping to sustain support for NATO's Afghanistan mission from troop contributors such as the United States (Groeling and Baum, 2015) and Denmark (Jakobsen and Ringmose, 2015).

Scholars have nonetheless acknowledged that narratives have limitations and can lose purchase with public audiences, as they did with Britain's operation in Libya (Colley, 2015) and Italy's in Afghanistan (Coticchia and Simone, 2015). This loss of public backing is often attributed to shortcomings in narrative content, with Ringsmose and Børgesen (2011, p. 505), stressing that 'weak storylines are likely to result in a souring public opinion environment' and Graaf *et al* (2015, pp. 9-10) observing that 'inconsistency' and the lack of 'an unequivocal explanation for the use of military force' can breed 'doubt about who is winning and who is losing'. Other factors are also found to erode narrative effectiveness, including the absence of elite consensus (Jakobsen and Ringmose, 2015), the failure to appreciate deep-seated societal myths (Schmitt, 2018), and the new 'media ecology' (Miskimmon *et al*, 2017, p. 10-11), which makes it harder to control the narrative.

Two further limiting factors, which are often mentioned but rarely scrutinised (Coticchia, 2015), are a narrative's failure to resonate with the prevailing norms of target audiences and its lack of verisimilitude (or plausibility). We argue that these factors help us understand how and when strategic narratives lose resonance with public audiences. Crucially, they revolve around narrative reception and are, accordingly, only partly under the control of narrators since there are limits to how far policymakers can credibly stretch the narrative to get it 'right' and make it 'fit' with diverse societal norms and developments on the ground. These 'beyond-narrative'

factors are, alongside narrative content, central to our framework (discussed below). This framework is deployed to show how, in contrast to France's strategic narrative on Operation Serval (January 2013-July 2014), which was congruent with strong French and Malian support, its narrative on Operation Barkhane – which began in August 2014 and will end in its present form in 2022 – lost traction with public audiences in both France and in Mali.

In adopting this framework, this article makes several contributions. First, it provides an appreciation of how strategic narratives offer more or less agency to policymakers in different normative and 'evenemential' (or event-driven) contexts. This is vital at a time when so much modern warfare takes place in the fourth dimension, involving virtual (dis)information campaigns, intelligence-gathering and (counter)narrative construction (Betz, 2008). Second, it sheds light on particular narrative challenges in the military sphere, notably the need to cater for two core, often irreconcilable, audiences: the domestic public of the intervening power ('in-group') and the host population (outgroup'), whose 'hearts and minds' must be won over. Finally, it provides a fresh perspective on how France, the EU's (European Union's) most significant military power, initially secured and then lost majority public support for its largest and bloodiest missions in Africa for over 50 years. In so doing, it offers insights into an intervention, which is being recalibrated rather than halted and which remains a valuable 'laboratory' for strategic narrative scholarship.

To make these contributions, this article begins with an overview of France's missions, public responses to them and non-narrative explanations of those responses. Thereafter, it applies our framework to French operations. The first section shows how French public support for Serval was high but fell sharply towards the end of Barkhane. It demonstrates, without claiming causality, how this drop is consistent with a weakening of Barkhane's narrative content and

decline in its normative resonance and verisimilitude. The second section describes how Malian public attitudes were extremely positive towards Serval but soured dramatically during Barkhane. It finds that France's narrative lost resonance, over time, with a Malian population, which prioritised different norms and was in close proximity to deteriorating events on the ground. It concludes that strong, carefully crafted narratives may afford agency, particularly at the start of a conflict, but struggle, over time, to chime with diverse audiences and challenging evenemential contexts.

Conceptual framework

Before outlining our framework, it is worth noting that it is not the purpose of this article to examine the 'nature of narrative' (Archetti, 2017, p. 219) or how narratives are distinguished from 'frames' (Miskimmon et al., 2017; Livingston and Nassetta, 2018), 'master narratives' and 'master frames'.[1] Whilst we acknowledge the importance of precise definitions, our main focus is not on delineating the definitional boundaries of strategic narratives or demonstrating that they are 'uniquely persuasive' (Colley, 2017, p. 4). Instead, our discussion centres on how far strategic forms of government communication, specifically those that fit with widely used definitions of strategic narratives (see Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2020, p. 8), may be congruent with different levels of public support.

Turning to our framework, this has two strands: narrative content and 'beyond-narrative' factors. There is no consensus on the constitutive elements of a strong narrative content or plotline. For Goodall Jr. (2010: 131), it must 'hang [...] together' and 'ring [...] true'. For Freedman (2006, p. 23), it should explain 'who is winning and who is losing'. For their part, Ringsmose and Børgesen (2011) have identified features that define a 'successful' narrative,

specifically a clear and compelling mission purpose, a cause-effect dimension, the promise of success, and the absence of counternarratives from elite commentators opposed to military intervention. Ringsmose and Børgesen (2011, p. 514) contend that 'if all major political parties and most non-parliamentarian foreign policy elites … accept and perhaps even bolster the strategic narrative … [it] will stand almost unchallenged'.

The second strand focuses on 'beyond-narrative' factors, namely resonance with prevailing societal norms and verisimilitude. These factors offer a more granular understanding of narrative reception. The importance of normative resonance is acknowledged in the literature, with Freedman (2006, p. 23) observing that a narrative 'must appeal to the values, interests and prejudices of the intended audience'. Ultimately, however, there is no agreement on how to build this dimension into analyses (Schmitt, 2018). Some scholars incorporate societal norms within a framework that combines strategic narratives with elite-competition theory and insights from the event-driven school (Jakobsen and Ringmose, 2015). Others weave together narrative content and normative resonance, stressing the need for 'a compelling mission purpose' which is 'related to existing national interests, cultural norms, and values' (Dimitriu and Graaf, 2016, p. 7).

Building on these insights, our starting point is that a narrative's reception is, unlike its content, largely outside the control of even skilled strategic narrators. In other words, narratives can be adapted to fit better with prevailing norms within a target audience but there is a limit to how far such stretching can be taken, even with the help of sophisticated storytelling techniques (Colley, 2017). This limitation is compounded when a narrative needs to appeal to 'different national audiences with different values and different historical experiences (with the use of military power)' (Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011, p. 513).

Turning to the second beyond-narrative factor, verisimilitude, its importance is acknowledged by Ringsmose and Børgesen (2011, p. 513), who stress the need for 'some degree of correspondence' with 'real-world events'. Equally, Freedman (2006, p. 23) has argued that '[a]n effective narrative will work' at least partly because 'it is not going to be exposed by later information and events'. Clearly the more prolonged the conflict, the greater the risk of this happening, as armies initially seen as liberation forces often end up being viewed as occupying forces.

Despite this recognition of the importance of verisimilitude, the link between narratives and their evenemential context is rarely discussed in detail (Coticchia and Simone, 2017). In many cases, it is simply noted in passing (Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011). In others, it is included – under the rubric 'conformity with the situation on the ground' – in a wider framework for assessing strategic communication (Coticchia, 2015) or in discussions of the 'personal experiences' of people embroiled in conflict (Simpson, 2012, p. 22). While these approaches have merit, we contend that more weight needs to be attached to verisimilitude and particularly to any lack of verisimilitude, as this will gradually erode a narrative's purchase. There is, in fact, a limit to how far a strategic narrative can be manipulated, say, to suggest that military action is a success when the evidence is pointing to failure. As Freedman (2015, p. 25) has observed, 'It might be possible to reconcile apparently incompatible demands through a rhetorical trick or to combine optimistic assumptions … but such devices can soon be exposed'. This problem is compounded by the fact that diverse audiences have different perspectives, depending on their exposure to 'fake news' and proximity to the conflict.

Applying the framework

Before applying this framework, it is worth making some methodological points. First, we reconstructed France's strategic narrative from statements by leading French government and military figures, as reported on official websites and in French newspapers, particularly editorials, available on Nexis-UK. We drew the media/ political commentary on this narrative from the same sources and from Malian newspapers on Bamada.net, Malijet.com, Maliweb.net and MaliActu.net. In total, we consulted 1,150 articles. We also drew on eight interviews with senior policymakers and military officers in Paris, Bamako and New York. In addition, we assembled three (40,000 to 50,000-word) corpora from French presidential and senior ministerial speeches on Serval (January 2013 to July 2014); Barkhane (mid-2014 to November 2019); and Barkhane (December 2019 to mid-2021). Using the content analysis software Antconc, we compared these corpora with a Leipzig University reference corpus (Goldhahn *et al*, 2012) comprising 300,000 French standard sentences. In so doing, we identified the ranking and frequency of keywords (words used so frequently in our target corpora that there is considerable statistical certainty that they were selected deliberately). By linking these keywords to two 'frames' – understood here as the '"bricks" for building a strategic narrative' (Coticchia, 2015, p. 60) – present throughout France's operations (see Table 1), we were able to highlight an important inflection in France's narrative from late 2019, which coincided with a sharp fall in support for Barkhane.

Second, we treated France's narrative on its Sahelian missions sequentially. In so doing, we recognised that these operations, though inter-connected, had distinct mandates, and that Barkhane, with its wider remit (simultaneously combatting terrorism, illegal immigration and transnational crime) and longer duration was always likely to find it harder to sustain public

support. At the same time, however, our findings suggest that the Barkhane narrative in its early years actually correlated with strong French public backing. Indeed, domestic approval ratings only tumbled around a year after France reframed its narrative following the November 2019 helicopter collision that killed 13 French soldiers.

Finally, in assessing public responses to France's interventions, we paid particular attention to opinion polls. We acknowledge that public attitudes are not fully captured in polls and may have different impacts within different political systems (Graaf et al, 2015, p. 353). We also recognise that there are 'several competing explanations—schools of thought— on why the mass public supports the use of force' (Klarevas, 2002, p. 417). The first focuses on 'cumulative' or 'marginal' casualties (Mueller, 1973; Gartner and Segura, 1998), with the public deciding when risks are worth incurring in the national interest. The second concerns the mission's principal policy objective or PPO (Jentleson, 1992), whether operations are expected to succeed (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009), are succeeding (Record 1993,) or are causing 'war fatigue' (Converse 1987). The third focuses on partisan, multilateral or elite 'cues' (Baum and Groeling, 2009; Kull and Destler, 1999; Berinsky, 2007) that shape public confidence in military interventions (Larson, 1996).

While we recognise that these explanations could shed valuable light on changing public attitudes towards France's operations, we also demonstrate, in our next section, how none of them quite works in the French case. In our view, there is a need for a strategic narrative account which can help identify significant correlations between changes in public attitudes towards conflict and the strength of the French strategic narrative's content, normative resonance and verisimilitude. While such correlations do not prove a causal connection, they suggest a 'co-evolution' and should not be dismissed as purely coincidental.

With the above in mind, we hypothesise that there should be: i) a strong correlation between France's compelling storyline on Serval, with its high levels of normative resonance and verisimilitude, *and* robust French public support for the mission; ii) a clear congruence between France's weakening narrative on Barkhane, with its lower resonance with beyond-narrative factors, *and* a loss of public confidence; and (iii) a sharp decline in the acceptance of France's storyline by the Malian public, who prioritise different norms and are closer to the conflict.

Interventions, Responses and Non-Narrative Perspectives

Before proceeding, it is worth providing a brief overview of France's interventions, the French public response and some largely non-narrative explanations for this response. France's original mission, Serval, was launched by French President François Hollande in January 2013. It followed an attack by Malian Tuareg separatists and jihadist groups linked to Al Qaeda, which occupied much of Northern Mali and threatened to take over the country. France's 3,500 troops, accompanied by 2000 Chadian soldiers and the Malian armed forces, benefited from financial, logistical and training support from Northern states, alongside an EU training mission and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission. France secured rapid military successes, hailed the country liberated and announced the operation's successful completion in July 2014.

The successor mission, Barkhane, was launched in August 2014. More ambitious in scope, it focused on counterterrorism across five Sahelian countries (the G5): Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mauritania. Barkhane merged with France's longstanding Operation Epervier in Chad, relocated its headquarters to N'Djamena; established bases in Mali, an intelligence unit

in Niger and a special forces centre in Burkina Faso; as well as supporting the creation of a G5 Sahel Joint Force in 2017. Despite increases in French troops (to 5100 in 2020) and additional commitments from European states (the Takuba task force involving special forces), Barkhane struggled to make progress (*Monde Diplomatique*, 2021a). In June 2021, French President Macron announced plans to end Barkhane, with the closure of three French bases in Mali, troop reductions (to 3,000 by mid-2022), the relocation of the headquarters of military operations to Niger, and greater reliance on Takuba and local African forces (France 24, 2021).

Turning to the French public response (Malian attitudes are discussed later), this was positive towards Serval. According to an opinion poll (IFOP, 2013a), 63% of the French public backed the intervention at its launch in January 2013. Support peaked at 73% in February (IFOP, 2013b), just after France's retaking of northern cities such as Gao and Timbuktu, but slipped back to 59% in March 2013.

As for Barkhane, it enjoyed broad support in its early years, with approval ratings of 65% in 2015 (DICoD, 2016), 57% in 2016 (IFOP/DICoD, 2016) and 64% in February 2019 (IFOP/DICoD, 2019). Support fell to 58% in November 2019 (IFOP, 2019), immediately after a helicopter collision. Yet, even then, approval ratings held up across mainstream voters on the Left (59%), Centre (73%) and Right (56%), though less so with hardliners in La France Insoumise (48%) and Rassemblement National (48%). It was not until January 2021 that a sharp drop occurred when a majority of the public (51%) disapproved of this mission. This decline was across the board: on the Centre-Left (49%), Centre (64%), Centre-Right (46%) and in the Rassemblement National and France Insoumise (43%) (IFOP, 2021).

Such a fall, after years of steady support, requires investigation. While non-narrative explanations could each shed light on this issue, none provides a definitive account. To illustrate, the first 'school of thought', which contends that public backing falls with mounting casualties, explains why support was stronger at the end of Serval (when there were nine casualties) than in mid-2021 (when Barkhane had seen a further 48) (Ministère des Armées, nd). It also accounts for the 10-point dip in support in 2020, when nine French soldiers were killed (Ibid). Yet, the link is not clear-cut. Thus, domestic approval remained at 64% in February 2019 despite a death toll of 26 (Ibid). It also held up (59%) in November 2019 after the loss of 13 soldiers in a helicopter accident (Ministère des Armées, nd). While casualty tolerance can be higher where vital interests are at stake, it seems unlikely that France's limited geo-political interests in its Sahelian ex-colonies would, at least without a strong narrative, have immunised the public against the impact of such casualties.

A second account focuses on the PPO and whether this is targeted at 'foreign policy restraint' (that is, halting foreign aggression against Northern powers) or effecting 'internal political change' in another country (Jentleson, 1992, p. 53). An emphasis on restraint should enjoy greater 'domestic legitimacy' than 'efforts to protect … other governments' (Ibid, p. 54). Jentleson's explanation fits quite well with Operation Barkhane given this mission's strong focus on defending France/ Europe against Sahelian terrorist threats. However, it struggles to explain why Serval retained substantial French public backing despite its strong emphasis on safeguarding Malian security[2] and promoting internal political change (democracy and elections) in this distant conflict-ridden country.[3] It also does not tell us why domestic support fell so sharply for Barkhane one year after France, at its January 2020 Sahelian summit, tightened its focus on the threat of aggression, targeting a specific group (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) and zone (Trois Frontières). As we shall see, this increased emphasis on

'restraint' did not work, partly because of growing scepticism about this jihadist threat to mainland France and partly because France adapted its narrative at this time, openly acknowledging the colossal challenges still facing this operation.

A related account focuses on mission success (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, 2009). This is useful in explaining public backing for France's 'successful' Serval operation and declining support for the 'unsuccessful' Barkhane. This perspective does, however, fail to explain why Barkhane enjoyed strong approval ratings between 2014-19 despite any obvious breakthrough on the ground. Nor does it tell us why war weariness (Blainey, 1973) set in at a time (between 2020 and 2021) when France's 'surge' was, with Operation Bourrasque and the use of armed drones, 'successful in strict military terms' (Tull, 2021a, p. 1).

A further explanation, focusing on cues, is also potentially useful. Thus, multilateral cues may well have buoyed public support for Serval. Ultimately, however, they worked less well for Barkhane, probably because France was, despite declarations of support from an even broader international coalition, still seen to be doing the heavy lifting alone. Equally, 'partisan' cues may have played a marginal role. Thus, outbursts by France's hard-Left leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon may have increased his voters' disapproval ratings (from 52% in November 2019 to 57% in 2021 (IFOP, 2021)). Yet such cues should not be overstated given the longstanding centre Left/ Right consensus on French military interventions (Jankowski, 2017). Another cue, arising out of elite political/ media commentators (Larson, 1996), will be considered within our strategic narrative framework, since consensus among those commentators arguably solidified public support for Serval while dissensus doubtless undermined confidence in Barkhane.

A Weakening Narrative

While recognising that a multitude of variables contributed to fading public confidence in France's military interventions, the remainder of this article explores what our strategic narrative framework might add to our understanding of this phenomenon. A possible starting point would be the assertion by Ringsmose and Børgesen (2011, p. 505) that a weakening storyline led to a 'souring public opinion environment' in some NATO countries active in Afghanistan. We will not make such a bold claim here in relation to France's interventions, not least given our view that narrative traction is also dependent on normative resonance and verisimilitude. We will nonetheless demonstrate that while the Serval narrative was strong (with clarity and consistency of purpose, an emphasis on cause-effect, a credible pathway to success and an absence of counternarratives), Barkhane's messaging was less consistent and appealing, particularly around the time that public support for the mission was fading.

Clarity of purpose. From the outset, Serval's purpose was enunciated clearly and consistently in ways that were easy for the public to get behind. As can be seen from the keyword rankings and frequencies in Table 1, two 'frames' stood out in the Serval narrative. The first stressed the restoration of 'peace' and 'stability' in a single country, 'Mali', through a mission which offered 'support' and sought to 'stop the jihadist advance, prevent these groups from further endangering Mali's stability, and restore Mali's territorial integrity' (Le Drian, 2013a).[4] The second emphasised Serval's role in combatting 'terrorists' and ensuring the 'security' not only of Mali but also of French expatriates (Hollande 2013c), France and Europe (Fabius, 2013a). As Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius asserted, 'We need to stop the terrorists' breakthrough, otherwise the whole of Mali will fall into their hands threatening all of Africa, and even Europe' (BBC, 2013).

Table 1: France's Strategic Narrative: Top 250 Keywords, Keyword Ranking and Frequency

Clarity of Purpose:	Keyword	Serval (January 2013-July 2014)	Barkhane (August 2104-November 2019	Barkhane (late 2019 to mid-2021)
		Keyness Ranking (Word Frequency)		
i) Peace/Stability *Geographic focus*	Mali	**1**(531)	**6**(290)	-
	Sahel	**184**(23)	**2**(184)	**1**(338)
	Sahelian	-	**138**(8)	**39**(16)
	Sahelisation	-	-	**164**(5)
	region	-	-	**42**(75)
Goal	reconciliation	-	**57**(31)	-
	peace	**88**(55)	**20**(102)	**246**(22)
	stabilisation	**91**(23)	**204**(10)	**135**(12)
	stability	**170**(18)	**118**(19)	**148**(15)
Means	pillars	-	-	**40**(26)
	support	**85**(39)	**166**(20)	**47**(36)
	coordination	-	-	**70**(25)
	reinforcement	-	-	**84**(25)
	re-engagement	-	-	**132**(6)
	training	-	-	**165**(31)
	reconfiguration	-	-	**173**(6)
	remobilisation	-		**187**(6)
	partnership	-	126/ 25	**188**(18)
	amplification	-	-	**243**(5)
ii) Terrorism/ security	terrorists	**3**(151)	**17**(85)	**18**(70)
	security	**30**(130)	**26**(126)	**96**(55)
	terrorism	**54**(53)	**29**(70)	**7**(97)
	jihadists	-	**167**(15)	**150**(15)
	terrorist	**124**(32)	-	-

The Barkhane narrative, which was in its early years congruent with stable public backing, also relied on these frames, initially increasing its emphasis on 'peace' and 'stability' in the 'Sahel' (Table 1). It even held out the prospect of 'reconciliation', soon after the signing of Mali's 2015 peace agreement. It also began talking up the link between 'terrorists' and domestic as well as

Malian 'security'.[5] Thus, it affirmed that the operational aim was to 'support the armed forces of partner countries' in their 'struggle against armed terrorist groups' (Ministère des Armées, 2019), while offering more regular reminders that, as President Macron (2017a) put it 'our own security is at stake in the Sahel'. Such a stance would, as well as papering over intractable political challenges facing Mali, play out well with a French public which traditionally supported missions serving French security interests rather than humanitarian goals (Jankowski, 2017).

From late 2019, however, important changes were made to Barkhane's messaging, which coincided with a sharp fall in domestic public support. References to 'peace', a term associated with France's exit strategy and likely to appeal to parts of the pacifist Left, dropped out of the top 200 keywords in our corpus. Crucially too, the focus on 'stability' was accompanied by a franker assessment of the complexity and scale of the effort required to ensure 'the return of the state' (Macron 2020) across the Sahelian region (whether through multiple 'pillars', 'support', 'coordination', 'reinforcement', 're-engagement', 'training' 'reconfiguration', 'remobilisation', 'partnership' or 'amplification) (see Table 1). Such an appraisal, alongside 'admissions' that 'trends in the Sahel were moving in the wrong direction, *despite* international intervention' (Tull, 2021a, p. 2), was unlikely to bolster public confidence.

Furthermore, while France continued to emphasise 'security', this frame lost resonance forseveral reasons. First, French politicians, despite making significantly fewer references to 'security' (Table 1), still managed to inflate the security risk in ways that would be exposed by subsequent authoritative reporting (International Crisis Group, 2019). Thus, they asserted that Sahelian jihadists were part of a 'global threat' (Le Drian, 2017a), engaging in 'the same combat' as, terrorists in the Levant, in Iraq and Syria (Hollande, 2017), and ready to 'strike

French women and children' (Macron, 2017b). Second, France prioritised the term 'terrorism' (keyword 54 during Serval, keyword 7 in late Barkhane), arguably making it harder to see how a war could be waged or progress measured against this concept. Finally, France contradicted its own longstanding claim that negotiation was impossible with 'terrorists'/ 'jihadists' (discussed below).

Logic of Necessity. The second feature of France's narrative focused on the necessity of action. Serval was portrayed as the only way forward as Mali was facing 'aggression from terrorist elements' (Hollande, 2013c) and it was only 'a matter of hours' (Fabius, 2013b) before the country was overrun. Other actors had reached similar conclusions, as France was acting at the request of the 'legitimate government of Mali' (Fabius, n.d.) and backed by the UN Security Council and 'entire international community' (Hollande, 2013a).

The Barkhane narrative also stressed the necessity of military action, as requested by Sahelian states (Hollande, 2015). Over time, however, the rhetoric would be toughened up only to be toned down, even contradicted, subsequently. Thus, Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault (2017) stressed that the only possible response was a hard-hitting one, noting that 'We are engaged in an unambiguous fight against those who identify themselves as terrorists. There is as such only one approach, not two'. This rhetoric would, however, later be undermined by President Macron (2018), who advocated 'a global strategy in which military action is accompanied by strong political and diplomatic action and a technical, economic and educational project'. Significantly too, French politicians repeatedly stressed the need *not* to talk to terrorists (Macron, 2020). Yet here too, they had to backtrack, with French Army Minister Florence Parly (2021) accepting that 'Our enemy … is not homogenous' and that France could talk to terrorists who 'were willing to be integrated into the peace process'.

Crucially too, the necessity argument was undermined by Macron himself when, at the January 2020 summit, he called upon Sahelian leaders to stop equivocating and state their support unambiguously for France's continued presence.

Pathway to success. Turning to the third feature of a strong narrative, pathway to success, this was set out convincingly by Serval, where policymakers stressed that France had 'no vocation to remain' (Hollande, 2013b), that it had an exit strategy (Fabius, 2013a), and that the mission had been 'perfectly accomplished' (Hollande, 2014). By contrast, Barkhane struggled to articulate such a pathway, instead harking bark to Serval's successes (Hollande, 2017). The narrative focus shifted from exit strategies to counterfactuals, specifically what might happen if France withdrew. French General Gérard-Marie Lecointre contended that without Barkhane, Sahelian countries would collapse and 'terrorism would develop uncontrollably' (Le Figaro, 2019a). Significantly too, policymakers trumpeted tactical gains, such as the neutralisation of jihadist leaders (Le Drian, 2015); the discovery of arms caches (Ibid), and patrols involving the Malian army and Tuareg forces (Le Drian 2017b). They also attempted to shift the blame, as Malian politicians were called upon to deploy 'the necessary means to ensure their own security' (Le Drian, 2019). Finally, the narrative came to be marked by repeated calls for 'patience and determination' (Macron, 2018) and by admissions that France 'would never achieve a clear-cut victory' (Le Figaro, 2019d). Such an assessment was likely to prove 'corrosive' (Gelpi *et al*, 2009, p. 13) of public support.

Domestic Counternarrative. The fourth feature is the absence of a serious counternarrative. Serval's messaging enjoyed support from opposition figures and media commentators, who accepted the purpose and necessity of this intervention. Thus, in France's National Assembly, the operation was welcomed by the Centre-Right's Jean-François Copé as 'just and necessary'

since 'France's security … [was] at stake'; by the socialists' Bernard Le Roux as a way of preventing a 'new jihadist sanctuary'; and by the centrist Hervé Morin as a guarantee that Bamako would not become 'a suburb of Kabul' (Assemblée Nationale, 2013b). These views were echoed in editorials, with the centre-Right *Le Figaro* (2013b) stressing that 'the nation is behind its army' and the centre-Left *Le Monde* (2013a) dubbing the intervention 'the least bad option'. When, moreover, in April 2013, the mission needed fresh Parliamentary approval, this was voted through unanimously (Assemblée Nationale, 2013a).

While there were criticisms, these never amounted to a counternarrative. For centre-Right politicians, Serval should have done more to involve African and European partners and build 'a true coalition' (Assemblée Nationale, 2013b). The far Left's leader Mélenchon deemed Serval not in France's interests or in defence of any 'legitimate democracy' (Ibid). However, such critics were out of kilter with many of their own supporters, and their voices carried little weight.

While Serval's narrative held off any domestic counternarrative, Barkhane's messaging struggled in this respect. As a rule, Barkhane's purpose, specifically its focus on domestic security, which became particularly marked from late 2019,[6] was accepted by mainstream commentators. Thus, an editorial in *Le Figaro* (2019b) observed how France's mission would guarantee its own security (Mali's mountain ranges being compared to the 'blue line of the Vosges'). Where Barkhane's narrative was, however, challenged was over claims about the directness of the Sahelian threat. An editorial in *Le Monde* (2021b) noted that 'for now, no terrorist attack on France or its neighbours has been linked to the Sahelian context'. *Le Monde Diplomatique* (2021b) even suggested that France's 'indefinite presence' might lead groups to 'seek revenge by attacking Europe'. Furthermore, doubts were expressed as to why the French

army, hampered by defence cuts (Le Figaro*,* 2018a), was still going it alone, why European partners were not living up to their defence ambitions (*Le Figaro*, 2019c*)*; and why 'the states of the region' were not working harder to promote stability (*Le Monde*, 2019).

As regards France's narrative on necessity, this enjoyed more lasting support across the political establishment. The Centre-Right weekly *Le Point* (2020) ran the headline 'France must remain in the Sahel', while *Le Monde's* editorial (2020b) cautioned against 'outright withdrawal', which would have 'devastating effects' for 'African populations and for Europe in terms of immigration'. Equally, mainstream politicians ruled out rapid withdrawal, with *Les Republicains* even calling for an intensification of French efforts (Assemblée Nationale, 2021a). The exception was again the hard Left's leader, who demanded an end to France's 'crusading, predatory and paternalistic spirit' (Mélenchon, 2021). Over time, however, editorials began calling for 'a 'trimming of the sails', as a way of freeing up 'manpower' and signalling to Sahelian governments that 'French protection is not their right and that their own soldiers had to pick up the baton' (*Le Monde*, 2021a).

While there were few demands for outright withdrawal (RFI, 2021), there was, particularly in Barkhane's later years, a growing critique of France's methods. France was accused of not following due process (as 'neutralisations' of jihadists were not being reported to the legislature; *Le Monde*, 2017) and of exceeding its counterterrorist mandate in Chad, where French airstrikes protected francophile President Idriss Déby from Chadian insurgents (Powell,2020). France's 'narrow security-led vision' and 'martial rhetoric'*,* was also said to be recruiting future jihadists and allowing Sahelian armies to act with impunity (*Le Monde*, 2018).

Turning to Barkhane's pathway to success, this was seriously questioned. While editorials recognised that French army actions had 'taken out several jihadist leaders' (*Le Monde*, 2021a), preventing the Sahel from becoming 'a "caliphate" the size of Europe' (*Le Figaro*, 2019c), they also stressed that France had no way out of the Sahelian 'impasse' (*Le Monde*, 2019) and was waging an 'unwinnable war' (*Monde Diplomatique*, 2021a).

'Beyond-narrative' factors

It was not only a weakening storyline but also a loss of narrative resonance and verisimilitude that coincided with fading domestic public support. The Serval narrative had chimed better than Barkhane's messaging with two norms prevailing in French society, namely external military intervention (IFOP, 2013c) and national security (Jankowsky, 2017). French interventions in former African colonies had been accepted across the political spectrum throughout the postcolonial era, aided by a political system that did not require prior parliamentary approval for military action by France as the self-appointed 'gendarme of Africa' (Interview with French delegation, New York, March 2019). Though weakened by France's questionable actions in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, this norm was bolstered by the 1999 Chicago Doctrine (a framework for determining when 'Western' powers should intervene militarily) and the UN's 2005 Responsibility to Protect. Against this backdrop, UN-approved external interventions consistently won French public backing, with favourable ratings for operations in Kosovo (April 1999, 58%) and Darfur (July 2007, 55%) (IFOP, 2013c, p.10). The Serval mission also met with approval, albeit aided by other legitimising factors, including UN Resolutions and France's invitation from Mali's interim government.

Crucially too, the Serval narrative had resonated with the norm of national security. This link to domestic security, which was a regular feature of French speeches (see Table 1 and endnote 2), was important as a 2013 IFOP poll on defence issues found not only that 52% of respondents considered the protection of vital national interests their top priority but also that operations in Mali served those interests. This link was significant at a time when deadly attacks had just been carried out on French soldiers and schoolchildren in Toulouse and Paris. Indeed, the streets of Paris were, from March 2012 to February 2014, under red-alert-level military protection via the Vigipirate scheme.

By contrast, Barkhane's messaging was forged at a time when the norm of intervention was under pressure internationally from Russian singlemindedness (its blocking of external intervention in Syria and its March 2014 annexation of Crimea) and growing American isolationism (its October 2019 drawdown from Syria then Iraq, and its April 2021 announcement on withdrawal from Afghanistan). Significantly too, there was a perception that Barkhane was not serving French *grandeur* but exposing the failure of France's 'omnipotent' Republic to resolve this crisis. It was no longer self-evident to a tax-paying public, given its experiences of terrorism on French soil, that a Sahelian operation met its overriding concern by making France safer (Interview with ex-French officer, Bamako, January 2019). Furthermore, the financial cost of the conflict, rising from 695 million euros in 2019 to one billion euros in 2020 (Assemblee Nationale, 2021c, p. 75), was compounded by the murder of aid workers and the loss of French soldiers– 57 killed and almost 500 injured (Assemblée Nationale, 2021b).

Turning to verisimilitude, the focus here will be limited to the alignment of France's narrative to progress in the field. With Serval, there were concrete signs of progress: military successes,

low casualty numbers and the retaking of northern cities. In addition, the presence of UN and African forces seemingly offered an exit strategy, enabling France to announce a symbolic drawdown in April 2013 (Le Figaro, 2013b). These successes, coupled with tight control over frontline reporting, largely eclipsed setbacks over the peace process, the containment of violence and Kidal (discussed later).

In Barkhane's case, France struggled to keep a lid on negative reporting on a conflict that had spread to central Mali, neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger, and was threatening coastal states like Cote d'Ivoire and Benin (*Monde Diplomatique*, 2019). Barkhane was, moreover, failing to halt drug-trafficking, hostage-taking and inter-ethnic conflict (*Monde Diplomatique*, 2021a). Equally, it could only watch while the peace process in the north stalled (Carter Centre, 2020), two coups occurred and a substitute state emerged in some places (*Info Matin*, 2020). Furthermore, it was struggling to engineer an exit strategy, as the Malian Armed Forces and the G5 Sahel – initially considered 'a promising track' (Interview with French officer, Paris, July 2019) – remained inadequate to the task.

Over time, the lack of verisimilitude of Barkhane's more optimistic claims drew growing criticism. That is not to say that French public opinion was at this time clamouring for any immediate withdrawal. In truth, the conflict remained an abstract construct occurring in a faraway land, and the French population had not been 'gripped' by the costs of Barkhane (Interview with French Foreign Ministry, July 2019). As one senior military officer observed, the conflict had not been 'in the forefront of public debate' due to the media prominence accorded to Coronavirus (Interview in Paris, December 2020).

Summing up, our first two hypotheses have been met. Thus, Serval's compelling storyline, normative resonance and verisimilitude coincided with favourable public attitudes towards this mission. By contrast, Barkhane's weakening storyline, particularly from late 2019, coupled with its reduced normative resonance and verisimilitude, correlated strongly with fading public support.

Malian attitudes and strategic narratives

Our final section focuses on the traction that France's strategic narrative may have had on a second core audience, the Malian population, which has long been at the epicentre of this Sahelian conflict. Let us begin by observing that the Malian public reaction to Serval was initially very positive, with 97% per cent approval in February 2013 (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2013a, p. 27). France's intervention was still 'judged positively by the quasi-totality of the population' three months later (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2013b, p.10). In contrast, Malian support for Barkhane plummeted from 47% in 2018 to 12.7% in March 2020 (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2020, p. 65). While there were still pockets of support in Northern Mali, there were also growing calls for French withdrawal as well as nationwide protests organised by the M5 (Mouvement du 5 juin), the Groupe des Patriotes and Yèrèwolo debout sur les remparts.

Before looking for possible links between France's narrative and this loss of public confidence, it is worth noting that non-narrative accounts could also be useful here. To illustrate, the casualty aversion thesis points to a possible correlation between fading support and Malian military casualties, estimated at 1832 between 2013 and 2020 *(Jeune Afrique*, 2021). Explanations focused on lack of success also map well on to falling levels of support for Barkhane. However, 'success' looked different to southerners hoping to punish Tuareg rebels,

northerners wanting greater autonomy and Malians living in the centre who were anxiously seeking an end to armed attacks. Finally, elite cues, sometimes supportive (stressing that 'in Mali, we are also defending Europe') and sometimes not (insisting on Mali's right to talk to jihadists (*Jeune Afrique*, 2019), are particularly useful and will form part of our strategic narrative analysis.

Mali's counternarrative

France's claims about the purpose of its Serval mission, effectively saving Mali first and protecting Europe second, had played out well. The Malian National Assembly saluted the French willingness to intervene (*L'indépendant*, 2013) while *Le Journal du Mali* welcomed 'the outstretched hand of France' (*Le Monde*, 2013b). Doubts were inevitably expressed by hard-liners who alleged that France was just defending its strategic interests, including oil and gold in Mali, uranium in Niger (*Malijet*, 2013), and its military base in Tessalit (*L'Aube*, 2014). Ultimately, however, these claims enjoyed limited purchase in a context where Mali's very survival was threatened.

Significantly too, Malian commentators had broadly accepted the necessity of military intervention. Even the normally critical Mahmoud Dicko, President of Mali's Islamic High Council, backed Serval, as did figures in the Malian diaspora in France (Haut Conseil des Maliens de France, n.d.). Criticisms were, however, voiced over France's methods. These revolved around France's liberation of the northern city of Kidal without Malian army support and France's subsequent refusal to help the Malian army retake Kidal from the separatist National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA in French): non-jihadist Tuaregs involved in the initial assault on Mali (Maliweb.net, 2013). These actions revived colonial

memories of French favouritism towards the Tuaregs and prompted an angry reaction from Mali's National Assembly, which deplored the 'unacceptable and incomprehensible attitude of … Serval's forces' (*L'Indépendant*, 2014). Overall, however, criticism was contained thanks to Serval's military successes, for which Malians were 'immensely grateful' (Connan and Sada, 2017, p. 7).

Yet while Serval's narrative was never seriously challenged, Barkhane's messaging was assailed by a critical, often ill-informed, counternarrative. France's storyline on Barkhane prioritised the protection of Europeans, not Malians, from 'terrorist sanctuaries' (France 24, 2020) and was, as such, always likely to lose traction with Malian audiences. France's narrative also talked up the scale of French commitments (see Table 1) raising the prospect of an even larger and more enduring military presence. The above, together with repeated French calls for the Malian government to negotiate with the MNLA (Maliweb.net, 2013), paved the way for allegations by prominent Malians about the end-goals of France's mission. These included claims by Dicko that France was trying to 'recolonise Mali' and that jihadism was 'a Western creation' (Bamada.net, 2015). Conspiracy theories also suggested that Paris wanted to gift Kidal to the Tuaregs (Tull, 2021b), that France had attacked a Nigerien military base in Diffa to justify maintaining its military presence; that it had delivered, in December 2019, motorbikes to jihadists in Mali (*Monde Diplomatique*, 2021a); and that it was, according to the Malian singer Salif Keita, paying mercenaries to kill Malians and then blaming this on jihadists (Haidara, 2020). While unfounded, these allegations necessitated French rebuttals, reflecting growing criticism at a time when France was talking up the scale of its efforts (see Table 1) and arguably contributed to Macron's calling of the January 2020 Pau summit at which Sahelian leaders were required to clarify their support for French action (Tull, 2021a). The

perceived arrogance of France in summoning African leaders to Pau may have further eroded Malian support for French military operations (Tull, 2021b).

Turning to Barkhane's claims about the necessity of French intervention, these benefited from some support in the mainstream press (e.g., MaluActu.net, 2021). But they were undermined by allegations that French troops were an ally of Tuareg militias and an occupying presence (MaliActu.net, 2020). At the same time, the 'necessity' argument was undercut by French attempts to cover up incidents of collateral damage, such as the 2020 'Bounty massacre', a drone-strike on a wedding that allegedly killed 19 civilians alongside three jihadists (Assemblée Nationale, 2021b, p. 79). Significantly too, France's messaging was undermined by missteps in strategic communication. To illustrate, a widely distributed tract which was supposed to say 'Barkhane is watching over you' was mistranslated as 'Barkhane is watching you' (Ibid, p. 81).

Finally, the credibility of France's pathway to success in Mali was doubted. For the Groupe des Patriotes, the jihadist threat had, since 2012, moved closer to the capital. Equally, a former Bamako MP Moussa Diarra blamed France for the proliferation of violence to central Mali (*L'Obs*, 2020). The implication was that France, in which limitless powers were vested, was not trying to eradicate the terrorist threat or eliminate jihadist leaders (Interview with Malian MP, Bamako, January 2019). This concern was even voiced publicly by Burkina Faso's Defence Minister, Chérif Sy (*Mail and Guardian*, 2019), who wondered whether the French had 'another agenda'.

Beyond-narrative factors

There appears to be a congruence between France's weakening storyline and falling Malian support for Barkhane. At the same time, the drastic decline in Malian confidence correlates closely with the Barkane narrative's failure to connect with prevailing Malian norms or the evenemential context.

The Serval narrative had benefited from a normative fudge. Thus, while the norm of external military intervention had never been embraced by Mali (never having called upon France to intervene before), this West African country was facing an existential threat at the time of Serval. As such, Malians welcomed France's intervention as a way of preserving sovereignty. Indeed, according to an ex-French ambassador (Interview, July 2019), Mali's southern, black Christian population perceived Serval as a way of restoring territorial integrity and 'at last intervening against the Tuareg rebellion; that was why it was okay'.

Barkhane's narrative, however, struggled to cling to this normative fudge. Indeed, French actions suggested that France was now intent on infringing, not defending, Malian sovereignty. France had established military bases (five decades after such an arrangement had been refused by Mali's first president, Modibo Keita). Second, Paris' refusal to help the Malian army retake Kidal in May 2014 (resulting in the death of 50 Malian soldiers), coupled with France's joint patrols with Tuareg militias, fuelled rumours that Paris was seeking to partition Mali (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2020, p. 66). France's readiness to conduct military operations without consulting the Malian army compounded this problem, as did its refusal to 'allow' the Malian government to talk to 'terrorists', despite this being demanded by Mali's national conferences (International Crisis Group, 2019).

There was a similar loss of resonance with another priority of ordinary Malian citizens, namely 'human security'. Serval's messaging had addressed this priority at a time when the population was 'traumatised and exhausted' (Bergamaschi, 2013, p. 7). However, during Barkhane, the indications were that France was making matters worse. While Northerners in Gao still welcomed France's military presence, southerners in Bamako, where there were virtually no French troops, were more critical (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2020, p. 66). Indeed, polling suggested that 53.5% of Malians believed that Barkhane was not doing enough to keep people safe, while 24.5% thought it was mainly concerned with protecting itself (Ibid). This impression was increased by France's tendency to undertake patrols in full protective gear (*Monde Dipomatique*, 2021).

Turning to verisimilitude, it is worth underscoring the gulf between France's narrative of progress and Malians' lived experiences. A few observations should suffice here. First, while French claims to victory had made sense when Serval was freeing villages and expelling jihadists, they rang hollow when, under Barkhane, the violence became more deeply rooted in the centre (the key to Mali's economic activity) and more intense: more than 4,000 people were killed in 2019, five times more than in 2016, according to UN sources (Bamada.net, 2021). Second, France's claim that the security situation would have been worse without Barkhane was meaningless to many ordinary citizens in Mali, where, in 2018, 26% of people surveyed felt psychologically damaged by feelings of insecurity (Afrobaromètre, 2018); and where in 2021, 347,000 Malians were displaced and 5.9 million needed humanitarian assistance (Humanitarian Programme Cycle, 2021, p. 21). Third, France's assertions surrounding Mali's return to democracy proved illusory as President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was removed in a coup on 18 August 2020 and his successor was also toppled. Finally, France's counter-terrorist rhetoric enjoyed limited traction in Mali, where so-called terrorists looked 'just like your

neighbours, parents and sometimes … your children' (Guichaoua, 2017); where deadly attacks on unarmed Malian citizens were more likely to come from government forces than extremists (*Le Monde*, 2021); and where Barkhane's 'anti-terror focus' proved hopeless at resolving local conflicts or 'settling cattle problems' (Interview with European delegation, New York, January 2019).

Summing up, there has been, in line with our third hypothesis, a growing disconnect between France's strategic narrative and the perceptions of ordinary Malians who prioritised human security and were physically and emotionally close to deteriorating developments on the ground. France's narrative was almost bound to hold little sway with Malian audiences in such an unfavourable context.

Conclusion

This article began by asking how and when strategic narratives lose traction with public audiences during protracted conflicts. After exploring non-narrative explanations, it used a strategic narrative framework to shed light on public responses towards France's Sahelian interventions. It found a strong correlation between France's compelling storyline on Serval, its normative resonance and verisimilitude *and* strong public backing for this operation in both France and Mali. While Barkhane's messaging initially conveyed a clear sense of purpose around the achievability of peace, stability and security, its reframing from late 2019, coincided with a sharp fall in public confidence in both France and Mali. This drop was arguably compounded by inconsistencies in the narrative and its loss of normative resonance and verisimilitude. While the Barkhane narrative may have retained residual backing with the

French public until late 2020, it lost any kind of purchase with most Malians, who were operating to a different normative mindset, geographically and emotionally closer to the conflict, and painfully aware of the gap between rhetoric and results.

So, what can we infer from the above? First, strong strategic narratives (as per Serval), which 'tie together otherwise disjointed events' (Graaf et al, 2015, p.8) and articulate a convincing pathway to victory, are indeed more likely to persuade a volatile domestic electorate than weaker narratives (as per Barkhane) calling for patience. Second, strong strategic narratives are ever more vital in an era where warfare increasingly takes place in the fourth dimension and affords so many opportunities for the construction of (dis)information campaigns, fake news and compelling counternarratives. Third, narratives are constantly up for contestation: a narrative initially deemed successful (as per Serval and initially Barkhane) may, at any point, lose traction with domestic and overseas audiences.

Fourth, and this point is not specific to Mali, narratives in the military field face particular challenges, notably the need to adapt to a fast-moving environment; to offer selective accounts that retain verisimilitude; and to win over both the domestic public and the host audience. In the case of the latter, particularly in an African context, there may be issues beyond normative resonance that feed local prejudices. These include historical legacies, compounded by rumour and conspiracy theories, that can be difficult, particularly for an ex-coloniser, to contest (Tull, 2021b). Another challenge, not examined here, applies where a multinational coalition is working together, as policymakers must ensure that the narrative appeals to other Western foreign publics (Recchia and Chu, 2021). Finally, while narratives can indeed offer politicians agency, this agency is limited by the diversity of audiences and evenemential context.

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[1] Coticchia and Cantanzaro (2020, pp. 7-8) identify common definitions of these concepts.

[2] A keyword in context search of the top 100 uses of 'security' reveals 42 references to Mali, 22 to Europe and 36 to the 'Security Council'.

[3] Jentleson would explain this in terms of the 'halo effect' (increased public tolerance arising out of a rapid military victory). Our Serval corpus contained 51 references to 'elections' (keyword 102) and 27 to 'democracy' (keyword 149).

[4] All translations are by the authors.

[5] A higher number (32) of the top 100 references to 'security' in Table 1 now relate to Europe, even if there are still more references (44) to Sahelian security.

[6] 29 of the 55 references to 'security' in Table 1 relate to Europe, with only 21 now pertaining to Sahelian security
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