

Operation Barkhane and Boko Haram: French counterterrorism and military cooperation in the Sahel

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In late 2014 and 2015, France began showing signs of military involvement in the war against Boko Haram in Nigeria. On 4 February, *Le Figaro* reported that French planes were carrying out reconnaissance missions on the Nigerian border on behalf of Chad, Niger and Cameroon. French President François Hollande, however, ruled out any direct French military engagement as well as any overflights of Nigerian territory.¹ France has taken more and more of an indirect role in the conflict in Nigeria, deploying troops to Diffa in Niger to support Nigerian forces, as well as a second detachment to Cameroon.² French Foreign Minister, Laurent Fabius, stated officially, however, that ‘it is not for a country outside of Africa, even for a country that is as close a friend to Africa as is France, to substitute for the Africans’.³

France’s interest in the Boko Haram conflict has grown significantly since 2014, and France has made considerable effort to send military aid to its allies fighting in Nigeria in 2015. Fabius says that ‘there is a zone of stability, including Chad, Cameroon and Niger that must not be destabilized’.⁴ Since its military intervention in Mali in 2013, Operation Serval, France has centralized its military forces in the region to stabilize the Sahel, and the fight against Boko Haram is part of this overall framework. France’s current forces are engaged in Operation Barkhane, launched on 1 August 2014 to combine the ongoing French operations in Mali and Chad. It deployed 3000 soldiers, across five countries, and is really the extension of France’s operation in Mali.⁵ It is in this context that French forces are providing aid for the operations against Boko Haram, but it is also important to take into account the larger structure of French

¹ Alain Barluet, ‘Boko Haram : La France effectue des vols de reconnaissance près du Nigeria’, *Le Figaro* (4 February 2015).

² See the French Foreign Minister’s official declarations on the deployment of troops to Niger (it is thought to be a deployment of no more than 10-15 soldiers) at the French Foreign Ministry, ‘Déclarations de Laurent Fabius lors de son déplacement au Niger’ (22 February 2015), available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/dossier-pays/tchad/la-franc-et-le-chad/visites-9039/article/declarations-de-laurent-fabius-118017. Laurent Lagneau, ‘Boko Haram : La France va déployer un détachement de liaison et de contact au Cameroun’, *Zone Militaire/OPEX 360* (17 March 2015).

³ French Foreign Ministry, ‘Déclarations de Laurent Fabius lors de son déplacement au Niger’.

⁴ French Foreign Ministry, ‘Déclarations de Laurent Fabius lors de son déplacement au Tchad’ (21 February 2015), available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/dossier-pays/tchad/la-franc-et-le-chad/visites-9039/article/declarations-de-laurent-fabius.

⁵ French Defense Ministry, ‘Lancement de l’opération Barkhane’ (1 August 2014), available at: <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/actualites/lancement-de-l-operation-barkhane>.

military aid to Africa, and its effect on the current offensive. Rather than intervening directly on its own, as in Mali, France is using its military aid and presence in the Sahel to create and support a powerful sub-regional alliance to take on Boko Haram in Nigeria, which is in the French national interest.

This paper will analyze the French support for the offensive by Chad, Niger, and Cameroon against Boko Haram. The first part will look at the progress of the intervention since the beginning of this year. The second part will look in detail at French military cooperation in the Sahel and the state of the armies involved in the conflict. The third part will focus on the French military itself, analyzing the Barkhane mission, and the Boko Haram threat in the greater context of the French counterterrorist mission in the Sahel.

The Francophone Countries go to War in Nigeria – Winter-Spring 2015

In January 2015, the Chadian Army, one of the most powerful in the region, began deploying troops for an offensive against Boko Haram. The military campaign also includes forces from three other African countries: Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria.⁶ As of the time of writing, Chad is contributing the most soldiers to the international force. The involvement of other regional powers in Nigeria has not been to the liking of Abuja,⁷ where the government stated that ‘all efforts undertaken by foreign forces would be at best complementary to the operations of the Nigerian Army’.⁸

There had been limited battles of Chad, Niger and Cameroon against Boko Haram in August and October 2014. The tipping point seems to have been the seizure of the Multilateral

⁶ Steven Jambot, ‘L’armée tchadienne, fer de lance de la guerre contre Boko Haram au Nigeria’, *France 24* (12 March 2015).

⁷ The presidential elections in Nigeria on 28-29 March 2015 may change the way the Nigerian government views the presence of troops from neighboring countries on its soil.

⁸ Jambot.

Joint Task Force (MJTF) base at Baga in Nigeria in January 2015.⁹ Fighting began in earnest on 4 February 2015, when soldiers from Cameroon fought a battle against Boko Haram fighters at Fotokol on the border between Cameroon and Nigeria. At the same time, the Chadian Army crossed the border into Nigeria, and took the city of Gaboru after heavy fighting with losses on both sides.¹⁰ The offensives were in response to Boko Haram attacks on targets within Cameroon, where Chad helped Cameroon's government beat back the insurgents.¹¹

On 8 March 2015, Chad and Niger began a major offensive against Boko Haram, attacking from bases in Niger into northeastern Nigeria. A number of media sources claim that the campaign was in response to Boko Haram's declaration of allegiance to the Islamic State, but it is clear that an operation of this scale had been planned for some time.¹² Chadian President Idriss Déby set out the objectives of the operation, which were to 'annihilate' Boko Haram, and 'eliminate' its leader, Abubakar Shekau, if he refused to surrender.¹³ These are exceptionally ambitious war aims, and it reflects a confidence on the part of the Chadian President in the strength of his country's army, which is starting to gain the label of the 'regional gendarme'.¹⁴

The offensive was undertaken with what appear to be primarily regular forces from the four countries involved, with reports of attacks by fighter aircraft (mostly Chadian), artillery and up to 200 armored vehicles including tanks.¹⁵ It must be asked, however, why would Chad in particular commit such extensive resources to a conflict against an insurgency in a neighboring country? The answer is two-fold. First, as in Cameroon, Boko Haram attacked targets in Chad in early 2015, and the Chadian government wanted to eliminate any possibility for a greater Boko Haram offensive against the country. Second, as Chad is landlocked, it is

⁹ Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, 'Boko Haram : les enjeux régionaux de l'insurrection', *Fondation Jean Jaurès, Note n°246* (10 February 2015), 5-6.

¹⁰ 'Boko Haram : offensive du Tchad et du Cameroun à la frontière nigériane', *France 24* (4 February 2015).

¹¹ 'Guerre contre Boko Haram : l'armée tchadienne prête à lancer l'offensive', *Le Point* (3 February 2015).

¹² 'Nouvelle offensive contre Boko Haram après son allégeance à l'EI', *Le Monde* (8 March 2015).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Jambot.

¹⁵ 'Nouvelle offensive contre Boko Haram', Aminu Abubakar, 'Chad, Niger launch ground and air offensive against Boko Haram', *CNN* (9 March 2015).

worried about the ability of Boko Haram to cut its two main commercial routes to the sea via Nigeria and Cameroon.¹⁶ Third, Boko Haram leaders publicly threatened Déby, as well as the Presidents of Cameroon and Niger on 20 January.¹⁷ Finally, Chad, Cameroon, and especially Niger are also attempting to cope with an influx of refugees from the fighting in Nigeria.¹⁸ The UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated in January 2015 that 135,000 people had fled Nigeria, with 850,000 more displaced internally.¹⁹ Niger was facing a food crisis due to poor harvests in 2014 and the refugee problem, making rapid action against Boko Haram an urgent imperative.²⁰

The campaign against Boko Haram has been fairly successful, though it remains a long way from the stated goals of annihilating the group. On 4 April, the Chadian Army said that ‘phase one’ of the operations had been completed, as Boko Haram fighters had been pushed back, and a number of towns and villages retaken in Nigeria. The Chadian Army’s Joint Chief of Staff, General Brahim Seid Mahamat, told *Euronews* that ‘Boko Haram’s capacity to cause trouble has been reduced’.²¹ The fighting has been difficult, and Chad claimed to have lost 71 soldiers in combat out of an estimated force of 5,000 as of 11 April.²² The successes have been against a backdrop of some bitter recriminations within the coalition, however. Déby and his military officers have been very critical of Nigeria’s unwillingness to cooperate, and Nigeria’s new president, Muhammadu Buhari, has indicated that he wants Nigeria to retake the lead combat role.²³ Déby wants a regional force from the African Union (AU), which aims at mobilizing 7,500 soldiers, to be deployed quickly against Boko Haram.²⁴ The United Kingdom

¹⁶ ‘Avec les militaires tchadiens en guerre contre Boko Haram’, *France 24* (10 March 2015).

¹⁷ ‘Boko Haram : Shekau menace Déby, Biya et Issoufou’, *Jeune Afrique* (21 January 2015).

¹⁸ Joshua Meservey, ‘Nigerian refugees fleeing Boko Haram are a crisis in the making’, *Washington Post* (29 January 2015).

¹⁹ Hélène Caux and Benoit Moreno, ‘More than 7,000 flee to western Chad to escape attacks on key town in Nigeria’, *UNHCR* (9 January 2015).

²⁰ ‘Niger says Boko Haram refugees to worsen its food crisis’, *Reuters* (18 March 2015).

²¹ Alisdair Sandford, ‘Phase one over in Boko Haram battle, say Chad-Niger forces’, *Euronews* (4 April 2015).

²² ‘Le Tchad évoque ses pertes militaires face à Boko Haram’, *RFI* (11 April 2015).

²³ *Ibid*, Daniel Flynn, ‘Buhari win means Nigeria, not Chad, to lead Boko Haram fight’, *Reuters* (2 April 2015).

²⁴ Flynn.

has already offered 5 million pounds to help make the AU force a reality.²⁵ As of mid-May, Déby stated that ‘Boko Haram has been broken, but isn’t finished’, and indicated that there were significant problems of cooperation in the coalition fighting the group.²⁶ Chad’s parliament extended its mandate for the war on 20 May.²⁷ There has also been increased fighting in the Lake Chad area, including on the islands that are Niger’s territory, which has become a major concern for humanitarian relief groups.²⁸

It is clear that the African coalition, and Chad’s army in particular has been able to make major gains against Boko Haram. How has this been achieved? The missing piece of the story of this regional conflict against the Nigerian terrorist group is the involvement of the historical ‘regional gendarme’, France. It is likely that the French military presence and military cooperation substantially contributed to the increase in effectiveness of regional armies of the Sahel. President Hollande on 15 May 2015 met with Déby to discuss the offensive, and congratulated the coalition nations for making significant progress against Boko Haram.²⁹ The next part of this paper will examine the structural military cooperation with France’s Sahel allies in its proper context of ongoing post-colonial initiatives and as the result of French military actions in the region in the 1980s.

French Military Cooperation in the Sahel: 1960-2015

French military aid to regional partners in the Sahel is not a new phenomenon. France has an extensive military presence in Africa which facilitates aid to its Francophone allies via

²⁵ ‘Cameroon: Boko Haram – United Kingdom Offers Fcfa 4.4 Billion’, *AllAfrica* (6 April 2015).

²⁶ ‘More Cooperation Needed Against Boko Haram: Chad’, *Agence France Presse* (12 May 2015).

²⁷ ‘Chad extends offensive against Boko Haram’, *Agence France Presse* (20 May 2015)

²⁸ ‘Red Cross raises alarm over scale of Boko Haram crisis’, *Agence France Presse* (21 May 2015).

²⁹ ‘Entretien entre Idriss Déby Itno and François Hollande’, *JournalduTchad* (15 May 2015).

what the French government calls ‘operational [military] cooperation’ for interventions and peacekeeping, and ‘structural cooperation’ for routine missions of helping countries build up and maintain their military establishments.³⁰ This is based on three major elements: the French prepositioned forces, in Africa, the RECAMP training program and the bilateral military cooperation programs run by the French Foreign Ministry’s *Direction de la coopération de sécurité et de défense* (Directorate for Security and Defense Cooperation – DCSD).

The Permanent French Military Presence in Africa

With the decolonization of most of France’s Empire in West and Central Africa in 1960, France negotiated bilateral defense and military cooperation treaties to maintain a permanent military presence on the continent.³¹ A number of French bases were kept open, but were quickly reduced following the army cuts after the end of the Algerian War in 1962.³² The French base network was used to support military interventions in Africa, which started with an intervention in Gabon in 1964 in response to an attempted coup, and continues today, as the recent operations in Mali and the Central African Republic demonstrate.³³

³⁰ French National Assembly, ‘Rapport d’information par la Commission de la Défense Nationale et des Forces Armées en conclusion des travaux d’une mission d’information sur l’évolution du dispositif militaire français en Afrique et sur le suivi des opérations en cours’, N°2114 (9 July 2014), 143.

³¹ For many years the treaties were secret, especially regarding clauses for intervention in internal crises until the Sarkozy government decided to publish them openly after 2008. French Defense Ministry, *Défense et Sécurité Nationale. Le Livre Blanc* (Paris: Odile Jacob, June 2008), 154-155.

For the text of some of the current military cooperation treaties see:

Chad: ‘Accord de coopération militaire technique entre le Gouvernement de la République française et le Gouvernement de la République de Tchad, signés à N’Djaména les 6 mars et 19 juin 1976’, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/tchad.

Niger: ‘Accord de coopération technique entre la République française et la République du Niger’, (19 February 1977), available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/niger.

Mali: ‘Exclusif – l’accord de défense franco-malien [Texte Intégral]’, *Malijet* (19 July 2014).

Cameroon: ‘France-Cameroun : voici les accords de défense’, *Cameroon Voice* (21 August 2014).

³² The debate over the military bases in Africa was a particularly fierce one, pitting the Defense Ministry against what was at that point the Cooperation Ministry (absorbed into the Foreign Ministry in 1999). See Jacques Foccart, *Tous les Soirs avec de Gaulle : Journal de l’Elysée – I, 1965-1967* (Paris: Fayard/Jeune Afrique, 1997), 174-175.

³³ A list of French military interventions in Africa from 1964-2008 can be found in Christopher Griffin, ‘French Grand Strategy in Africa in the Fifth Republic’, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Southern California, 394-398, available at: <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll127/id/218417>.

According to the French Government, in summer 2014, France had 7515 soldiers deployed in Africa (not counting the 3000 soldiers in Operation Barkhane and the 1700 in the CAR).³⁴ The base structure is currently being reorganized around the principle of access to the Sahel. The key permanent bases in France are Dakar, Libreville, and Djibouti (Abu Dhabi is also counted for the African network)³⁵. France is in the process of reducing its forces in Gabon, however, to favor Abidjan as its new main base. According to the Chief of Staff for France's *Armée de Terre* (Land Forces), Abidjan is better sited to intervene in West Africa and the Sahel, as it was a source of soldiers for the operation in Mali in 2013. France is also looking to set up smaller bases in Néma (Mauritania), Gao (Mali), Agadez and Arlit (Niger), and Zouar (Chad).³⁶ Niamey is also a smaller base, where French and U.S. soldiers have drones operating across the region.³⁷ Forces at French bases are available for immediate deployment on operations, and are backed up by the *Guépard* rapid reaction force in France.³⁸

French forces in Chad are under a different system than the permanent base network. The Adji-Kosseï base, which adjoins N'Djaména airport, is not considered a permanent base, but a part of active operations. French soldiers are present in the context of Operation Epervier, launched in 1986 to halt the Libyan invasion of northern Chad. More will be discussed below about French cooperation with the Chadian Army, but there are still operational objectives for French troops in Chad, which include guaranteeing the stability and territorial integrity of the country as well as protecting the French expatriate population.³⁹

The French base system allows the army to respond quickly to emergencies such as in Mali and the CAR, and maintain close relationships with the militaries and governments of its

³⁴ French National Assembly, 26.

³⁵ Ibid, 16.

³⁶ Ibid, 39.

³⁷ Ibid, 53-54.

³⁸ Ibid, 34.

³⁹ Assemblée Nationale, Commission de la Défense Nationale et des Forces Armées, 'Compte-rendu d'un déplacement au Tchad' (10 February 2014), 3.

African allies. Along with the bases, France maintains the continental-wide RECAMP training program and bilateral military assistance programs.

Renforcement des capacités africaines de maintien de la Paix (Reinforcement of African Capacities for Peacekeeping Operations – RECAMP)

In 1997, France launched a new program for military training on the continent, RECAMP. French military assistance has considerably evolved since the 1960s, largely due to a lack of funds and personnel on the continent for large projects.⁴⁰ The nature of the assistance has also changed. According to Admiral Bernard Ragel, the French have moved from a position of ‘substituting’ for African armies to a situation after 2008 where ‘the priority of the French military presence needs to be to help Africa build its own collective security structure’.⁴¹ RECAMP is intended to do exactly that.

The RECAMP program is complex, and includes continental and regional military exercises (the AMANI AFRICA cycles are the most recent), several depots with available military equipment for underequipped African armies to draw on in case of need,⁴² and training programs, which are both bilateral and multilateral. The training programs encompass both access for African personnel to French military schools (though there are fewer places available currently than in the past), and the creation of the *Ecoles Nationales à Vocation Régionale* (the French Foreign Ministry translates this as ‘Regionally-Oriented National Schools’⁴³).⁴⁴ There are 17 schools in 10 countries that have a number of different programs, from officer training

⁴⁰ Funding for military cooperation in Africa has declined steadily since 1964. Lieutenant-Colonel Rémi Porte, ‘L’Assistance militaire depuis la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle’, *Doctrine tactique : Revue d’information et de réflexion*, n^o23 (2011), 4.

⁴¹ Admiral Bernard Ragel, ‘Le Contexte politico-militaire de l’assistance militaire’, *Doctrine tactique : Revue d’information et de réflexion*, n^o23 (2011), 7.

⁴² The depots are in Dakar, Libreville, Djibouti and Douala.

⁴³ Direction de la Coopération de Sécurité et de Défense (DCSD), ‘Les Ecoles Nationales à Vocations Régionales’, *Partenaires sécurité et défense : revue de la coopération de sécurité et défense*, n^o268 (Winter 2012), 1.

⁴⁴ Centre interarmées de concepts, de doctrines et d’expérimentations (CICDE), ‘Renforcement des capacités africaines de maintien de la Paix’, *Doctrine interarmées DIA-3.4.7(B), RECAMP* (2011), N^o179/DEF/CICDE/NP (22 September 2011), 20.

to health services to police training. There are three schools in Cameroon, which include police and gendarme training and Niger has a medical personnel training school.⁴⁵ France provides instructors and expertise, on the condition that the schools are open to personnel from other African countries.⁴⁶ French language instruction is emphasized for interoperability purposes.⁴⁷

RECAMP has been internationalized since 2002. The African Union, which was launched in 2002, created the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). One of the goals of APSA is to create an African Standby Force (ASF) with regional response capabilities by the end of 2015.⁴⁸ RECAMP is now oriented toward helping Africans build this force as well as strengthening African capacities to contribute to UN peacekeeping missions.⁴⁹ After 2007, RECAMP became EURORECAMP to take into account the willingness of the EU to contribute, but France has been very critical of the lack of initiatives from the EU for African missions.⁵⁰ While RECAMP is largely viewed as having been a successful venture, for the fight against Boko Haram, French bilateral cooperation via the DCSD was likely even more important.

Bilateral French Military Cooperation with the Sahel Countries

While French military cooperation under RECAMP is theoretically supposed to help a large number of African countries, it is clear that France favors certain countries over others. The traditional priorities for French military aid were Djibouti, Senegal and Chad.⁵¹ With the problems of terrorism in the Sahel, however, France has increased its military aid to the

⁴⁵ DCSD, 'Les Ecoles Nationales à Vocations Régionales', 24, 27.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 11.

⁴⁷ CICDE, 25.

⁴⁸ Alhaji Sarjoh Bah, Elizabeth Choge-Nyangoro, Solomon Dersso, Brenda Mofya and Tim Murithi, *The African Peace and Security Architecture: A Handbook* (Addis Ababa: Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung and the African Union, 2014), 50-55, available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/aethiopien/10779.pdf>.

⁴⁹ CICDE, 19.

⁵⁰ Général François Gonnet, 'De RECAMP à AMANI Africa', *Doctrine tactique : Revue d'information et de réflexion*, n°23 (2011), 24.

⁵¹ Porte, 5.

countries of what is now called the ‘Sahel G5’, created in 2014 for security cooperation between Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad.⁵² The following sections will look at French military cooperation and the state of the armies in the front line against Boko Haram, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon (not part of the Sahel G5), with a short detour via the Malian Army as a prelude to the final section on the place of Boko Haram in France’s overall strategy in the Sahel.

The Chadian Army

Chad was the theater of French military interventions in 1968-1972, 1978-1979, 1983-1984, and 1986-present due to both internal instability and external aggression.⁵³ After the last major rebel attacks in 2008 and 2009, which were defeated with the help of the French Army, the country has seen an unprecedented period of relative stability.⁵⁴ It now appears that Chad used that period, in conjunction with the French, to build up the country’s army into what the French Senate called in 2013, a ‘regional power’.⁵⁵ This build-up is unsurprising, as even with the relative calm in its internal politics, Chad faces a wide-range of external threats, including the instability in Libya and its effects on ethnic groups in northern Chad, the conflicts in Darfur and South Sudan, the conflict in the Central African Republic, terrorist groups in northern Niger (from the North Mali intervention of 2013), and Boko Haram.⁵⁶

Chad’s army is now considered as ‘probably the best in the region for desert zone operations’.⁵⁷ The army consists of two different parts, or what some analysts have labeled ‘two speed’.⁵⁸ The first is a sort of republican guard loyal to Déby, from the same ethnic groups as

⁵² ‘Un G5 du Sahel pour le développement et la sécurité’, *Le Monde* (16 February 2014), French Defense Ministry, ‘BSS : participation du CEMA au « G5 du Sahel »’, (11 April 2014), available at: www.defense.gouv.fr/ema/le-chef-d-etat-major/actualite/bss-participation-du-cema-au-g5-du-sahel.

⁵³ For details of the interventions, see Griffin, op cit.

⁵⁴ Géraud Magrin, ‘Les ressorts de l’intervention tchadienne au Mali (2013)’, *Echogéo* (28 June 2013), 3.

⁵⁵ French Senate, ‘Rapport d’information fait au nom de la Commission des affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées par le groupe de travail « Sahel »’, N°720 (3 July 2013), 105.

⁵⁶ Philippe Gros, Jean-Jacques Patry and Nicole Vilboux, ‘Serval : bilan et perspectives’, *Fondation pour la recherche stratégique*, Note n°16/13 (June 2013), 23.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 23.

⁵⁸ Assemblée nationale, ‘Compte-rendu d’un déplacement au Tchad’, 7.

his family, and is called the *Direction générale des services de sécurités des institutions de l'Etat* (DGSSIE). It is thought to be about 14,000 strong, and this is the force Chad has mainly used in interventions abroad.⁵⁹ The second part of the armed forces is the regular army, which is not as well equipped as the DGSSIE.⁶⁰ The French Foreign Ministry estimates total forces (including the DGSSIE) to be around 40,000 soldiers, considerably larger than the other Francophone states.⁶¹ In comparison to the Nigerian Army's total strength of 65,000, it is a significant force indeed.⁶²

The Chadian Army is modernizing, as Déby said it was made up of 'warriors rather than soldiers', but the modernization is moving slower than expected.⁶³ French military cooperation is playing a significant role in the rise in power of the Chadian Armed Forces. France is interested in Chad for its central location, which allows the French Army to maneuver between its other bases on the continent and respond quickly to crises.⁶⁴ The military assistance treaty with Chad (there is no mutual defense treaty) provides for French military personnel in Chadian uniforms to train the Chadian Army. The French officers seconded to the Chadian Army cannot participate on active operations, and cannot be persecuted in Chad. France also committed to provide military equipment (both free and paid), maintenance for that equipment and logistical support. In exchange, the Chadian government gave France the right to use its airspace and its airfields for military and civil flights.⁶⁵ Most of the military assistance treaties with the other Francophone countries have virtually the same terms.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 7-8.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 8.

⁶¹ In 2014, Chad had difficulty providing the UN with a reliable organizational chart for the regular army. Ibid, 8. See also, the French Foreign Ministry, 'Présentation du Tchad', (9 July 2014), available at: <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/tchad/presentation-du-tchad/>.

⁶² 'The Military Balance in Northern Nigeria', *Council on Foreign Relations* (16 September 2014).

⁶³ Assemblée nationale, 'Compte-rendu d'un déplacement au Tchad', 8.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 5.

⁶⁵ 'Accord de coopération militaire technique entre le Gouvernement de la République française et le Gouvernement de la République de Tchad'.

The French National Assembly stated in 2014 that France had helped Chad develop a viable air force prior to rebel attacks in 2008, and amongst other aid, provided 50% of the fuel for that air force, which is somewhat paradoxical for a country that has begun to produce large amounts of oil.⁶⁶ In 2014, there were 12 DCSD *coopérants*, mostly military officers, who were helping guide the modernization and restructuring process in the army, organizing military human resources, overseeing training programs, helping manage logistics, and collecting intelligence. This number is down from the 200 *coopérants* present in the 1990s.⁶⁷ The 1,070 other French forces present in the country also certainly contribute to training programs for the Chadian Army.⁶⁸ The French Army restructured the *Garde Nationale Nomade Tchadienne*, as well as the military hospital system and education in Chadian war colleges, spending 12 million euros over an unspecified period of time.⁶⁹ The French Army did not provide advanced equipment and vehicles to the Chadian Army, however, saying that it was unnecessary for Chadian operational needs.⁷⁰ The newest development is a three-year project to help Chad bolster its counter-terrorism capacities, which represents an investment of 600,000 euros by France.⁷¹

French military cooperation is seen to have been the most successful in Chad out of all of its African partners.⁷² Chad participated in the later stages of the French intervention in Mali, taking part in some of the hardest fighting in the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains in March 2013.⁷³ Chad lost 30 killed in the fighting to France's loss of 7 soldiers.⁷⁴ Chad then sent 2,250 soldiers

⁶⁶ Assemblée nationale, 'Compte-rendu d'un déplacement au Tchad', 3.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 8-10.

⁶⁸ French National Assembly, 'Rapport d'information', 21.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 149-150.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 150.

⁷¹ Ambassade de France au Tchad, 'Lutte anti-terroriste – coopération franco-tchadienne – 21.10.2014', (21 October 2014), available at: www.ambafrance-td.org/lutte-anti-terroriste-cooperation. DCSD cooperation is run via the French Embassy in the countries concerned.

⁷² French National Assembly, 'Rapport d'information', 149.

⁷³ French Senate, 'Rapport d'information', 23. Chad took part especially in the hard-fought battle at the AQIM stronghold in the Amétataï Valley.

⁷⁴ Michael Shurkin, 'France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army', *RAND Corporation* (2014), 25.

to take part in the UN peacekeeping force in Mali after the end of French operations.⁷⁵ Chad also fought with France in the intervention in the CAR in 2014. Fighting alongside the French Army against terrorist groups in Mali and in the mission in the CAR certainly gave the Chadian Army useful experience for the offensive against Boko Haram in 2015.

Chad's military power has not been uncontroversial, however. Chadian Army officers became angry in Mali in September 2014 as they believed the UN was using their soldiers as cannon fodder, after they lost 10 soldiers in three weeks of fighting. The Chadians made threats to leave the coalition.⁷⁶ Things took a more serious turn in the CAR where the Chadian Army was accused of supporting Muslim groups over the Christians. Events came to head on 28 March 2014, when, after a grenade attack on Chadian forces, Chad's Army opened fire on a crowd of civilians in the capital, Bangui. After the UN accusation, Chad withdrew its entire contingent from the peacekeeping forces. France, while saying the attack was provoked, still condemned the Chadian action.⁷⁷

The Nigerien Army

While Chad is France's most important partner in the Sahel, the French are also working closely with Niger in the fight against Boko Haram. Niger, like Chad, has been historically unstable, with four coups d'état (1974, 1996, 1999, 2010) and seven republics since decolonization. The most recent coup d'état eventually brought to power Mahamadou Issoufou, a Prime Minister in the 1990s.⁷⁸ The country seems to have stabilized somewhat in the meantime. Niger, the poorest country on the planet, faces many of the same security problems

⁷⁵ Gros, et al., 18.

⁷⁶ 'Mali : le Tchad accuse l'ONU de se servir de ses soldats comme « bouclier »', *Jeune Afrique* (20 September 2014).

⁷⁷ 'Centrafrique : le Tchad annonce avoir retiré toutes ses troupes'. *Le Monde* (16 April 2014). For the French official view, which is that the Chadian Army was attacked, but responded with 'disproportionate' force, see French National Assembly, 'Rapport d'information', 221-222.

⁷⁸ International Crisis Group, 'Niger : un autre maillon faible dans le Sahel ?', *Rapport Afrique*, N°208 (19 September 2013), 3, 17, 22-23.

as Chad, which include the situation in Libya, Boko Haram, and the spillover from the conflict in North Mali, with the presence of armed Touareg groups and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).⁷⁹

As the Niger Army recently overthrew the government, it cannot be considered completely reliable. It is a force with a great deal of experience in desert warfare, fighting multiple Touareg rebellions during the 1990s up to 2009. It also fought AQIM near the Mali border in 2010.⁸⁰ The army is divided into three different parts, the *Forces de sécurité*, largely organized to put down internal unrest, the regular *Forces armées nigériennes*, and the better equipped and more mobile *Forces nationales d'intervention et de sécurité*. The three parts together comprise about 12,000 soldiers.⁸¹

As with Chad, the Nigerien Army has proved to be surprisingly effective against Boko Haram. After the initial successes of the intervention in Nigeria in 2015, Issoufou even went so far to say that ‘the Boko Haram forces were overestimated... in the first contacts with our forces, we quickly understood that they were amateurs’.⁸² As with Chad’s Army, France has helped considerably with military assistance to Niger. France also has considerable interests in Niger as it is a major source of uranium for the French nuclear power corporation Areva.⁸³

French military assistance is somewhat different than that to Chad, as the focus has been more on equipment. France is helping Niger build an air force, with a gift of three Gazelle helicopters to the country in 2012, and the development of ULM capacities (in conjunction with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Senegal).⁸⁴ France has also, alongside the United States, stationed drones in Niger, and works with Nigerien officers in the drone war against terrorists in the

⁷⁹ Ibid, 1.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 40.

⁸¹ Ibid, 21.

⁸² ‘Le président du Niger sur Boko Haram : « Des amateurs »’, *Journal du Dimanche* (12 April 2015).

⁸³ International Crisis Group, 46.

⁸⁴ DCSD, ‘La coopération dans le Sahel : une approche globale’, *Partenaires sécurité et défense : revue de la coopération de sécurité et défense*, n°275 (February 2015), 16.

Sahel.⁸⁵ France is considering stationing fighter aircraft in Niamey, and the UK has made some efforts to look at the potential of Niger as a base as well.⁸⁶

While Niger's Army remains 'one of the most operational' in the region, it is also unstable and fragile.⁸⁷ Issoufou has doubled the defense budget, but was forced to cut funds to education, health and other social services in order to do so.⁸⁸ He is adamant about the need, however, to 'eradicate Boko Haram and chase them out of the Lake Chad Basin'.⁸⁹

The Cameroonian Army

In early 2015, France sent two military advisors from the Barkhane force to help Cameroon coordinate its operations against Boko Haram.⁹⁰ Aside from the direct operational support, there are three ENVRs located in Cameroon, as mentioned above, and military cooperation is significant, at 3.95 million euros in 2011.⁹¹ Vice-Admiral Gillier, director of the DCSD, said in April 2014 that 'it [Cameroon] is one of the three countries where our cooperation is the most developed, the most dense'.⁹² France has worked with Cameroon since 2006 to modernize all parts of its armed forces, especially in providing new equipment.⁹³ France's cooperation in Cameroon also is closely linked to naval priorities, in particular to

⁸⁵ French National Assembly, 'Rapport d'information', 142, 229.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 53.

⁸⁷ International Crisis Group, 41-42.

⁸⁸ 'Le président du Niger'.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Jean-François Belibi, 'Des militaires français aux côtés du Cameroun', *Cameroon Tribune* (30 March 2015).

⁹¹ Assemblée Nationale, 'Rapport fait au nom de la commission des affaires étrangères sur le projet de loi, adopté par le Sénat, autorisant l'approbation de l'accord entre le Gouvernement de la République française et le Gouvernement de la République du Cameroun instituant un partenariat de défense', N°3308 (5 April 2011), 13.

⁹² Jean-François Belibi, 'Cameroun – Coopération Militaire : La France et le Cameroun renforce les liens', *Cameroon-Info.Net* (24 April 2014).

⁹³ Assemblée Nationale, 'Rapport fait au nom de la commission des affaires étrangères', 18.

support France's ongoing anti-piracy operation, *Corymbe*, in the Gulf of Guinea.⁹⁴ France is not the only country aiding Cameroon, and a recent official French National Assembly document is clear that there is military aid coming from the U.S., Israel and China.⁹⁵ Russia has promised to provide artillery and transport systems, and Germany has provided other military vehicles to Cameroon's army.⁹⁶ All of this ongoing military cooperation has likely contributed to Cameroon's ability to field an operational army against Boko Haram.

Cameroon's armed forces consist of a regular army and *Bataillons d'Intervention Rapide* (BIR), which both have different chains of command. The BIR respond directly to President Biya, much like the DGSSIE in Chad.⁹⁷ The overall strength of Cameroonian forces is estimated at 12,500 soldiers, similar to Niger, and most of which are engaged at the time of writing against Boko Haram in the north of the country.⁹⁸ There is no permanent French base in Cameroon, but French forces have a permanent presence with a logistics unit at Douala, as it is the main seaport for access to N'Djamena, but it is limited to sixteen soldiers, who are not permitted to wear the uniform of Cameroon's Army.⁹⁹

The Malian Army

While Mali is not engaged in fighting Boko Haram, it is useful to take a short detour to discuss French efforts to rebuild the country's army, as it helps provide information on France's overall military strategy in the Sahel region. The Malian Army had trouble for many years with the Touareg factions in the north of the country prior to the coup d'état in 2012. After 1993, and the Peace of Tamanrasset, which put an end to a major Touareg revolt, the Malian Army

⁹⁴ Ibid, 13-14.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 14. It is unusual for French government documents to mention cooperation with other non-African countries, with the exception of the close cooperation between France and the U.S. in Niger and in Djibouti.

⁹⁶ Laurent Lagneau, 'La Russie va fournir des armes au Cameroun pour lutter contre Boko Haram', *Zone Militaire/OPEX 360* (17 January 2015).

⁹⁷ Pérouse de Montclos, 9-10.

⁹⁸ Cathy Haenlein, 'Can Chad Tip the Balance Against Boko Haram?' *RUSI Analysis* (12 March 2015).

⁹⁹ French National Assembly, 'Rapport d'information', 18.

began to integrate former rebels into the army. It did not work, and over the next two decades, there were continual desertions, and the deserters created militias in the north of the country.¹⁰⁰ Corruption was also a significant problem, and thus the Malian Army was in bad shape even before 2012.¹⁰¹ Earlier French military cooperation with Mali appears to have been insufficient in the face of the insurgent offensive in North Mali following the fall of Qaddafi in Libya.¹⁰²

The coup d'état in 2012 and the insurgent attacks in the north damaged the Malian Army significantly. After the French intervention in 2013, it was necessary to start over in rebuilding Mali's armed forces. The goal is to reach a 26 regiment force of 17,000 soldiers by 2019.¹⁰³ French General Lecointre told *Jeune Afrique* in March 2013 that all was not bad, saying that there was 'a generation of young officers around 40-45 years old...who are resolved to seize what they see as a historic opportunity to sweep away the past and construct a modern army'.¹⁰⁴

France delegated the training program for Mali's Army to the EU. The European Union Training Mission (EUTM-Mali), was intended to last for 15 months, but was extended, and accompanied by a civilian mission to improve internal security (EUCAP Sahel Mali).¹⁰⁵ By January 2015, 3,400 trainers were working in Mali, and the Malian army had risen to around 8000-8200 soldiers.¹⁰⁶ French official sources extensively criticize EU inaction in Mali and in the Sahel more generally, and the results for the Malian Army.¹⁰⁷ On 21 May 2014, there was a major battle between Touareg rebel forces and the Malian Army at Kidal, where the Malian

¹⁰⁰ Dorothee Thiénot, 'Les blues de l'armée malienne', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (May 2013). Dorothee Thiénot, a reporter for *L'Express*, was expelled from Gao on 16 April 2013, accused of 'ruining the image of the Malian Army', by reporting on Malian Army attacks on civilians. Christophe Barbier, 'Mali : Dorothee Thiénot empêchée, la liberté de la presse bafouée', *L'Express* (25 April 2013).

¹⁰¹ Gros, 16.

¹⁰² Tobias Koepf, 'France and the Fight Against Terrorism in the Sahel: The History of a Difficult Leadership Role', *Note de l'IFRI* (June 2013), 13.

¹⁰³ French National Assembly, 'Rapport d'information', 184.

¹⁰⁴ Benjamin Roger, 'Général Lecointre : « Il faut que l'armée devienne l'un des piliers de l'Etat malien »', *Jeune Afrique* (18 February 2013).

¹⁰⁵ European Union External Action Service, 'Common Security and Defence Policy: The EUCAP Sahel Mali civilian mission' (January 2015).

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin Roger, 'Deux ans après l'opération Serval, où en est l'armée malienne ?' *Jeune Afrique* (23 January 2015).

¹⁰⁷ French National Assembly, 'Rapport d'information', 181.

Army was defeated, and lost a great deal of territory in the north.¹⁰⁸ France had hoped to give the responsibility for security to the Malian Army to deal with what has become a ‘low-level insurgency’ in the north of the country, but for the time being, it seems to be unsuccessful.¹⁰⁹

Thus, from an overall point of view, French military cooperation in Africa seems at least partially successful, in that it has helped Chad, Niger and Cameroon field forces that have proved effective against Boko Haram, at least for the time being. It permitted France to create a coalition of Francophone states which could take the operational initiative against a terrorist threat, without direct French involvement in combat. This is part of the French initiative to get African countries to take the lead in solving their own military problems, but it also serves French national interests. On the other hand, the defeat of the Malian Army at Kidal in 2014 suggests that the French strategy of cooperation will not work in all cases, and that France will still need to be actively involved in the region to face the multiple threats in the Sahel. The final section will examine direct French military involvement in the Sahel and the role of the fight against Boko Haram in that overall strategy.

Operation Barkhane and French Military Strategy in the Sahel

While there has been some bilateral aid from the UK, the U.S., Denmark and Belgium for French operations in the Sahel since 2013, France has been the only country that has sent troops to the front line.¹¹⁰ Some in France have seen this a good development, as it allowed France to regain its ‘autonomy of decision’ after years of coalition command in Afghanistan.¹¹¹

Operation Serval – Mali 2013

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 178-180.

¹⁰⁹ Shurkin, 1-2.

¹¹⁰ French Senate, ‘Rapport d’information’, 145-146.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 166.

In January 2012, a number of armed groups declared independence in North Mali and began an armed offensive against the government. The long-running Touareg rebellion was initially pushed aside by a more radicalized group, Ansar Dine, which allied with AQIM and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), a splinter group from AQIM. For France, AQIM was always and remains the main threat.¹¹² AQIM, which had its roots in the *Groupe Islamique Armée* (GIA), which attacked targets in France in 1994 and 1995, turned increasingly to kidnapping French citizens after 2007. It also bombed the French Embassy in Mauritania in January 2011.¹¹³ In 2009, in a meeting between France, the UK, the U.S., and the EU, it was decided to adopt a strategy to support the militaries of Mali, Mauritania and Niger to fight the terrorist threat, without direct involvement of Western countries, a strategy called ‘leading from the side’.¹¹⁴ This looks distinctly like what France is attempting to do with Boko Haram, but in Mali, it did not work.

AQIM moved into North Mali from Algeria at some point in 2009.¹¹⁵ In January 2013, the allied groups in North Mali attacked into the south of the country, at which point France intervened to stop them. Ultimately, 4,500 French soldiers were deployed to the country, which included forces from the bases in Chad and Abidjan as well as *Guépard* troops from France. Air support, in the form of Rafales and Mirages, was used to destroy the enemy columns with French ground forces following on.¹¹⁶ France intervened to stop Mali becoming a ‘terrorist state’, and because of the fear of the spread of the terrorist groups to other friendly countries, Senegal in particular.¹¹⁷ The French military saw Serval as a major success, which retook North

¹¹² For a useful discussion of the different groups and the 2012 offensive, see the NATO Report: Assemblée Parlementaire de l’OTAN, Commission de la Défense et de la Sécurité, ‘Un arc de crise aux portes de l’Europe : un nouveau partenariat stratégique nord/sud pour le Sahel’, *Projet de Rapport Spécial*, NATO (10 April 2013), 3-6.

¹¹³ Koepf, 9-11.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

¹¹⁵ Gros, et al., 3.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 7-9.

¹¹⁷ French National Assembly, ‘Rapport d’information’, 112.

Mali and expelled the jihadist groups from the area, though as we saw above, there was a return of the insurgency in 2014.¹¹⁸

Unlike French counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in Afghanistan,¹¹⁹ Mali was fundamentally a counterterrorism campaign. French commanders were pleased that they were given the freedom to take the fight to the adversary. The commander of Operation Serval, General Barrera, said that it was a great mission, because French forces were to ‘liberate the country and destroy the terrorists while accepting losses’.¹²⁰ Significant firepower and special forces were favored to fight the terrorist groups along with close combat using regular French army units.¹²¹ French forces had been annoyed with the American reliance on ‘standoff fires’ in Afghanistan, and wanted to return to the ‘the right way’ of fighting through the more traditional French techniques of ‘close combat’.¹²² Speed was also paramount, as Hollande reportedly ordered at the start of the operation: ‘destroy those in front of you and go fast’.¹²³ This way of fighting is much more consistent with previous French operations in Africa than with the war in Afghanistan.

The choice for counterterrorism instead of COIN also probably had much to do with the fact that France had limited numbers of troops available, and few strategic and matériel reserves in Africa. Budget cuts in recent years have made life difficult for the French Army, and some of the equipment used in Mali was found to be obsolete or inadapted to the climate conditions.¹²⁴ The operation was also intended to be limited in time, but the withdrawal had to be suspended in May 2014 after the defeat of the Malian Army at Kidal.¹²⁵ The French began to reinforce

¹¹⁸ On war aims in Mali, see Gros, et al., 3.

¹¹⁹ The most recent (2013) iteration of French COIN doctrine gives much more importance to the offensive than does American COIN doctrine. See CICDE, ‘Contre-insurrection’, Doctrine interarmées, DIA-3.4.4(A)_COIN (2013), N°064/DEF/CICDE/NP (15 April 2013).

¹²⁰ ‘Mali : retour sur l’opération Serval avec le général Barrera’, *La Voix du Nord* (1 Octobre 2013).

¹²¹ French National Assembly, ‘Rapport d’information’, 34-35.

¹²² Shurkin, 10, 42.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 10.

¹²⁴ French National Assembly, ‘Rapport d’information’, 99-108. The Caracal helicopter, for example, did not work in the extreme heat conditions of North Mali.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 65.

their contingents in Gao to create what may become a permanent base, and in August 2014, consolidated their forces in Africa in a major counterterrorism operation.¹²⁶

Operation Barkhane

France found itself in 2014 with serious problems on several fronts in the Sahel, as well as three active operations: Serval in Mali, Epervier in Chad and Operation Sangaris in the CAR, which was aimed not at stopping terrorism, but at halting ethnic and religious violence. On 1 August 2014, France shut down Serval, and combined the Serval and Epervier forces into Operation Barkhane. Its headquarters is at N'Djamena, and is composed of 3,000 soldiers, 200 armored vehicles, 6 fighter aircraft, 3 drones and a variety of transport equipment.¹²⁷ Barkhane's dual missions are to aid the Sahel countries in their fight against terrorism and to stop terrorist groups from rebuilding their sanctuaries in the region.¹²⁸ A large part of the mission is seeking out terrorist bases and destroying their supply points, as a recent (April 2015) joint French-Nigerien-Chadian operation in Niger demonstrates.¹²⁹ A number of operations have concentrated on the Salvador Pass in Niger, where French and Nigerien troops have worked to interdict trafficking by terrorist groups in the area.¹³⁰

Barkhane is a 'regionalization' of the response to terrorism in the Sahel. French forces have taken up a central position based on N'Djamena in the east and Gao in the west, which allows them to face the threats from multiple fronts. AQIM remains the primary threat.¹³¹ There are a number of other threats, however, including the instability in southern Libya and the regrouping of jihadist forces there, with spillovers into northern Niger, the continuing problems

¹²⁶ Ibid, 39, 49, 65.

¹²⁷ French Defense Ministry, 'Lancement de l'opération Barkhane'.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ French Defense Ministry, 'Barkhane : point de la situation au 30 avril 2015' (30 April 2015), available at: <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/sahel/actualites/barkhane-point-de-situation-au-30-avril-2015>.

¹³⁰ French Defense Ministry, 'Barkhane : le Groupement tactique désert « ALTOR » conduit l'opération KOUNAMA' (5 March 2015), available at: <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/sahel/actualites/barkhane-le-groupement-tactique-desert-altor-conduit-l-operation-kounama>.

¹³¹ Conway Waddington, 'Understanding Operation Barkhane', *African Defense Review* (1 August 2014).

in Mali, the unrest in the CAR, Al-Shabab in Somalia and Boko Haram. The fight against Boko Haram is part of a region-wide strategy ultimately aimed, in the words of the French Defense Minister, at ‘the eradication of jihadist terrorism’ in the Sahel.¹³²

Barkhane has no time limit, and in December 2014, Le Drian expressly included the fight against Boko Haram in its mandate.¹³³ This looks to have been the go ahead for Chad, Niger and Cameroon to start to put major combat operations against the group in motion. Unlike with operations in northern Niger, however, France has not taken part in combat. France’s inaction on the ground is likely due to three factors. First, the French Army is likely stretched very thin in Barkhane, as 3,000 soldiers is very few to cover such a large region, even in targeted counterterrorism operations. Second, there appears to be a hierarchy of threats, as France is concentrated much more on dealing directly with the problems of AQIM and affiliated groups in Mali and Niger. Boko Haram appears to be a secondary priority, but a priority all the same. Third, while there has been a warming of relations between France and Nigeria since early 2014, with some cooperation in counterterrorism operations in the Gulf of Guinea, there is no reason to believe that Nigeria would tolerate the presence of French troops on its soil.¹³⁴

Conclusion

French strategy in Africa is focused on dealing with the threats posed by a number of jihadist terrorist groups and their attempts to destabilize weak African states, as was the case with Mali in 2012 and 2013. France reluctantly intervened in Mali, but restructured its presence after the intervention to be able to respond quickly to other threats in the region. It works closely

¹³² Laurent Lagneau, ‘Selon M. Le Drian, l’objectif de l’opération Barkhane est « l’éradication du terrorisme jihadiste »’, *Zone Militaire/OPEX 360* (22 July 2014).

¹³³ ‘Déclaration de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, ministre de la Défense, sur l’opération Barkhane dans la sahelienne et sur la politique de défense de la France, à N’Djamena le 31 décembre 2014’ (31 December 2014), available at: <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/153000039.html>.

¹³⁴ Corentin Dautreppe, ‘France-Nigeria : les raisons d’un rapprochement’, *La Tribune* (28 February 2014).

with its African allies, providing them with equipment and training for their armies, which has shown itself to be a policy with multiple successes and failures.

The interest in the fight against Boko Haram for France seems fairly new, even if the French government has been concerned about the group's activities for some time. The incursions into the territory of its Francophone allies led France to increase its military aid and support the operations of Chad, Niger and Cameroon. Beyond the worry about the direct attacks on its allies, France is concerned about the potential for the links between terrorist groups in the Sahel. The French Government was already concerned in 2014 with signs that Boko Haram was moving out of its traditional area of operations, and is particularly worried about the possibility for a junction with AQIM.¹³⁵ Boko Haram's 'pledge of allegiance' to the Islamic State in March 2015 reinforced those fears.¹³⁶

French policy toward Boko Haram will surely turn on the success or failure of the Francophone countries' offensive. As the offensive has gone well for the moment, it appears that France's strategy of creating a strong sub-regional coalition to fight a terrorist group that remains a secondary priority in the greater region has shown its usefulness. It remains to be seen, however, if France would intervene directly in the case of a setback such as in Mali, as its presence in Nigeria likely would not be welcome. French strategy in the Sahel surely has its limits, but for the moment, the compromise between offensive action in certain sectors and support for allies in others is showing some marked successes.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ French National Assembly, 'Rapport d'information', 122-126.

¹³⁶ 'Islamic State accepts Boko Haram's allegiance pledge', *BBC News* (13 March 2015).

¹³⁷ For an example of another significant operational success, France eliminated two top commanders in AQIM and Ansar Dine on 17 May 2015. 'France says killed two Islamist chiefs in Sahel region', *Reuters* (20 May 2015).