



CNA National Security Seminar Series

Security and Conflict in Mali: Alternative Models for Security Cooperation

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Introduction to Event

On July 13, 2017, CNA convened a roundtable featuring a panel of experts to examine security cooperation in Africa, with a focus on efforts in Mali and the Lake Chad Basin. The roundtable served as a forum for operators, practitioners, and experts from different countries, including the United States, France, and Mali, to learn from one another and compare two approaches to security cooperation. This event note will introduce the conflict regions that were the focus of the event, outline the two models of security cooperation discussed (the French-led Operations Serval / Barkhane, and the African-led Multinational Joint Task Force [MNJTF]), and close with reflections and lessons learned from the event participants.

Background to the Two Conflicts

The event focused on two pockets of instability in Africa: Mali and the Lake Chad Basin countries, including Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.

The current conflict in Mali has affected much of northwest Africa and has become a significant concern for the United Nations, France, and the United States. In this region of longstanding vulnerabilities, the most recent conflict began in 2011-2012 and culminated with a military coup led by junior officers and the overthrow of President Amadou Toumani Toure. Simultaneously, Tuareg groups led a series of uprisings in north Mali. The Tuareg have historically rejected the authority of the Bamako government and took advantage of the instability caused by the fall of Muammar Gadhafi, who had served as a stabilizing force in the Sahel by recruiting (and employing) thousands of Tuareg men. Strengthened by an influx of soldiers and weapons after Gadhafi's death, Tuareg nationalists increased their attacks against the Malian army under the umbrella of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA).¹ In addition to Tuareg nationalists, northern Mali is home to a number of jihadi groups, including Ansar Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (Mujwa), and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). These groups continue to carry out attacks in major cities in northern Mali, including Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu.²

In response to the growing influence of rebel and insurgent groups in northern Mali, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) organized an African military force to aid the Malian

¹ Simon Allison, "Mali: five key facts about the conflict," *The Guardian*, January 22, 2013, accessed August 8, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/22/mali-war-five-facts>.

² "Deadly attacks target UN peacekeepers in Mali's Gao," June 1, 2016, Al Jazeera, accessed August 8, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/mali-crisis-peacekeepers-killed-gao-attacks-160601043032404.html>.

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army. The planned response, which focused on negotiation and a delayed military response, was abandoned when rebels unexpectedly advanced into southern Mali. This prompted the Malian government to ask for French reinforcements, who were independently concerned with the rise of jihadi factions in north Mali, leading to the genesis of Operation Serval. The Malian government and armed groups signed the Algeria-brokered Bamako peace agreement in June 2015, though there is significant mistrust around its implementation. The conflict is ongoing and has spilled over into Niger and Burkina Faso.³

The countries of the Lake Chad Basin are also experiencing ongoing conflict today. Since 2009, Boko Haram, a jihadi group, has been waging a violent insurgency in northeastern Nigeria. The conflict has caused thousands of civilian deaths and has resulted in a humanitarian disaster, with over 10 million people in need of assistance and 2.3 million people displaced. Over a third of the 1.5 million displaced children suffer from severe malnutrition and live in areas that are difficult and dangerous for aid workers to reach.⁴ In recent years, this conflict has increasingly impacted Nigeria's neighbors, with suicide attacks on soft targets in Cameroon and on refugee camps in Nigeria. Though Boko Haram has faced setbacks, including rejection by the local population and the splintering of the group into factions over its allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) rather than al-Qaeda, the group remains a significant and enduring regional threat.⁵

Differences Between Security Cooperation Models

Both of these conflicts have led to external interventions in which the United States and European countries have partnered with African militaries to counter local threats and attempt stabilization operations.

Mali

While France's involvement in Mali is due in part to its geographic proximity and its post-colonial ties, U.S. involvement is due to the Sahelian terror threat, led primarily by AQIM. Prior to its involvement in the recent conflict, the United States has conducted security cooperation in the Sahel both bilaterally and multilaterally since 2001 (post-9/11). The approach has included military and peacekeeping operations by Malian, French, U.N., U.S., and other forces. In addition to logistical support, the United States provides intelligence and training to the French-led mission.

In response to the southward movement of jihadis in late 2012, French forces intervened in Mali at the request of the Malian interim government through Operation Serval (which transitioned to Operation Barkhane in August 2014). Operation Serval included both air and ground operations in north Mali that focused on retaking strategic areas from Tuareg and Jihadi-aligned groups. French

³ International Crisis Group, "The Sahel: Mali's Crumbling Peace Process and the Spreading Jihadist Threat," Commentary/Africa, March 1, 2017, accessed August 8, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/sahel-malis-crumbling-peace-process-and-spreading-jihadist-threat>.

⁴ International Crisis Group, "Lake Chad Basin: Controlling the Cost of Counter-insurgency," Commentary/Africa, February 24, 2017, accessed August 8, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/lake-chad-basin-controlling-cost-counter-insurgency>.

⁵ Ibid.

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forces led a coalition of forces from Mali, Chad, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and other countries, with support from major European countries and the United States. Operation Barkhane consists of several thousand French forces headquartered in N'Djamena, Chad. With its primary objective of counter-terrorism in the wider-Sahel region, Operation Barkhane includes the operation to counter jihadis in northern Mali and coincides with U.S. efforts in the region. Alongside this intervention, the United Nations established the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2013.

The "G5 Sahel" was formed in 2014 as an African-led inheritor of the ongoing French operations. The French-supported G5 effort will deploy 3,750 soldiers in an effort to secure the violence-prone border zones of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The G5 countries have much in common and deal with many of the same issues and challenges, such as fragile economies, extremist groups, and poor development indicators.

There are multiple challenges in the Malian security cooperation model. Coordination on the ground is a complex problem, because it includes multiple African militaries of varied capabilities, as well as U.N., French, U.S., and EU forces attempting to work in concert. A related challenge is the variable absorption capabilities, goals, and caveats of partner nations. The ultimate goal is to shift the responsibility for local security to the G5 countries, but capability gaps remain. For instance, frequent training rotations mean that G5 personnel may be unevenly trained and equipped.

Lake Chad Basin

The United States has also been involved in security cooperation in the Lake Chad Basin by supporting the African-led MNJTF, a counter-Boko Haram force based in N'Djamena, Chad, comprising forces from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. Containing and degrading Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa through the MNJTF is a primary focus for U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM).⁶ U.S. forces are involved through a combined French, British, and U.S. Coordination and Liaison Cell (CCL). The CCL coordinates international support to the MNJTF in an attempt to ensure that support is complementary and effective.⁷

In contrast to Operations Serval and Barkhane in Mali, the MNJTF was not conceived as a Western intervention, but rather aimed to preserve local ownership through African-led operations. The CCL seeks to enable, not control, the mission set. As a result, CCL support is indirect and includes activities such as training and information sharing. AFRICOM provides security force assistance to regional military partners, but does not engage in direct military operations.

The MNJTF is praised as a regional solution to a regional problem, but it has faced persistent challenges, such as the tyranny of distance, the difficulty of the terrain, and the limitations of local institutions. The mission is ongoing.

⁶ AFRICOM 2017 Posture Statement, "United States Africa Command 2017 Posture Statement," <https://www.africom.mil/media-room/document/.../africom-2017-posture-statement>.

⁷ Ibid.



Lessons Learned From Panelists on the Security Cooperation Models

Participants agreed that both of the security cooperation models discussed have advantages and disadvantages, and either could be effectively employed if properly tailored to local conditions. Some specific lessons that participants drew from their experiences with these two models included the following:

- In order to be effective, both forms of security cooperation—Western-led and Western-supported—should include an understanding of the absorption capabilities of local partners. This is essential to understanding how best to empower local partners.
- The initial response to crises in both Mali and Lake Chad Basin lacked coordination and cooperation. In Mali, the U.S. and the French forces were active in the arena but were not working together toward a common goal.
- Coordination in both areas has improved, but there is no quick or easy solution when functioning in an environment of systemic instability. While the cooperation model in Mali is effectively preventing the spread of jihadis southward, the French-led operation may not have long-term local support. The G5 is more likely to be accepted as a legitimate force, but is untested. Similarly, the MNJTF is hamstrung by the difficulties of countering Boko Haram without direct intervention from the CCL partners.
- Security cooperation runs the risk of bureaucratic bloat, with a multiplicity of partners eager to get involved but limited individual accountability or will to follow through.
- Security cooperation serves as a means for U.S. and French forces to closely interact in new and challenging environments, enhancing interoperability and garnering lessons learned for future bilateral or coalition engagements. French military cooperation with the United States is closer than it has been in the recent past, and much of this is the result of security cooperation in Africa. Challenges remain, particularly with shifting military and executive leadership, and variations in decision-making processes and structures.
- Mali serves as an example of why the “development darling” narrative, in which a previously struggling country is held up as a paragon of successful and stable development, should be avoided. Mali was often portrayed as a success story of democratic governance and rule of law before it descended into conflict and coups. When Mali collapsed, there were multiple red flags present prior to the coup, including illegal trafficking, corruption, and long-standing antagonisms between the north and south. In order to avoid this false narrative, governments and aid workers should critically assess a country’s security issues.

In sum, this event served as forum for the sharing of ideas and experiences in an attempt to continue to improve security cooperation models targeting conflicts that are of substantial concern to the national security of the United States and its partners.

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