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# Counterinsurgency governance in the Sahel[1]
## By Bruno Charbonneau

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## ☰ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**In the Sahel**, 2019 became the deadliest and most violent period that the region has faced since the start of the Malian crisis in 2012.

**France** has been the target of mediatized critiques, notably by organized groups from Mali, which led President Emmanuel Macron to summon his G5 Sahel counterparts to a Summit held at Pau on 13 January 2020.

**This obstinate counter-terrorism policy** in Mali and the Sahel has long shown its limits, and it could be argued that it has only worsened the situation.

**The problem** is not to propose political solutions per se, as if they are distinct from military strategy, but to understand that political solution as it is implemented and deployed, and which comes to express itself through diverse counterinsurgency practices in the Sahel.

**International military engagement in the Sahel** is based on counterinsurgency thinking largely inspired from French military experiences in Africa, in particular during the colonial era.

**To win hearts and minds** is to conceive of populations as much as a vulnerable social body, at risk and to be protected, as it is a body from which risks, dangers and threats emerge.

**Thus, military operations** should not be viewed as technical activities distinct from the political sphere, which (according to theory) facilitates the development of a space and time for political action. Rather, military strategy must be considered in its action and its political consequences, at least if one hopes to understand its failures and its limits in Mali and the Sahel.

**The "Global Approach"** as practiced in Mali facilitates the construction and consolidation of local and regional political orders of violence. While such political orders are always in construction and are locally contested, their existence is certainly in contradiction to the stated objectives of restoring the authority of the Malian state, maintaining its territorial integrity, and the political work of facilitating national reconciliation.

Without a doubt, 2019 became the deadliest and most violent period the Sahel has faced since the start of the Malian crisis in 2012. No matter the unit of measurement, this trend is unequivocal: be it the number of violent events, the number of victims (which doubled), the number of displaced people and refugees, the level and nature of the violence incurred (notably the Ogossagou massacre), the increased sophistication of attacks targeting national Armed Forces (for example the attack against the Nigerien Armed Forces at Inates), or the number of violent acts spreading to Niger and Burkina Faso. In spite of the notable growth in national military budgets and increases in troop levels for Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, combined with the resilience and determination of French and UN troops stationed across the Sahel, we cannot but recognize the failure of the existing responses to this never-ending crisis.

2019 also witnessed a profound increase in critiques made against these responses, which were expressed more openly and ardently, explored multiple angles, and originated in diverse social milieus (politicians, journalists, academics, civil society). Of course, critical analyses have always been present, some analysts having raised their concerns since 2014 that a counter-terrorist approach would not work in Mali, and that the situation would assuredly deteriorate should that approach be prioritized.[2] What seems to have changed in 2019 is a weakening of the dominant discourse around the crisis and of existing solutions to it. The emphasis placed on the threat of terrorism (specifically of the jihadist variant) authorized and legitimated a policy priority of advancing anti-terrorist solutions at the expense of others that were meant to follow successful military operations. In 2019, respected organizations like International Crisis Group even dared to suggest opening avenues of dialogue with jihadist armed groups.[3]

Mediatized critiques, notably by organized groups from Mali, were especially directed at the French government to the point that

President Emmanuel Macron summoned his G5 Sahel counterparts to a Summit held at Pau on 13 January 2020. This diplomatic spectacle intended to put these critiques to bed. The Summit allowed Macron's allied Heads of State to reiterate their common interest to continue their collaboration to neutralize the Sahel's terrorist threat. They reaffirmed the necessity for a continued French military presence and again prioritized continued counter-terrorist operations. Thus, they endorsed the French military strategy, while repeating clichéd rhetoric that a military solution could not solve the crisis and that political objectives had to be put forward.

This obstinate counter-terrorism policy in Mali and the Sahel has long shown its limits, and it could be argued that it has only worsened the situation.[4] In a context where armed groups are becoming more capable and whose insurrection strategies are regionalizing, it would be a mistake to focus exclusively on military strategy. Neither is this a question, however, of leaning towards a defense of militarization on the one hand versus advocating political solutions on the other. It is insufficient to vaguely discuss development strategies or political solutions we need to put forward, as if choosing between military strategy and so-called political solutions could be distinguished clearly and unambiguously.

What follows is an analysis of a military strategy that presents and imposes itself as a political choice and solution. The problem is not to propose political solutions per se, as if they are distinct from military strategy, but to understand that political solution as it is implemented and deployed, and which comes to express itself through diverse counterinsurgency practices in the Sahel.

# The Initial Strategy

When President François Hollande ordered the execution of Operation Serval in January 2013, he did not plan for a long-term military engagement. Serval was meant to establish the military control of the country and to recover the territorial integrity of the Malian state. French soldiers were to liberate and secure the necessary space and time required for the Malian Armed Forces, the UN, and other actors involved in peace talks to elaborate and put into place "political solutions".[5] The UN was meant to quickly replace French forces. By 2014, realizing that the security situation in the country could not be guaranteed, the French government transformed Operation Serval into Operation Barkhane, which expanded to cover the G5 Sahel states.[6] As such, a French military presence became anchored in the long-term over this regional space, now with a view of accompanying and training African troops that would eventually deploy and replace French forces. Nevertheless, its military strategy remained the same: fighting terrorists in order to ensure the required time and space needed to implement "political solutions".

What consists of such a strategy? Military Chief of Staff of the French Armed Forces, Army General François Lecointre, described France's "Global Approach" for the Sahel "as a crisis management strategy centred on the Sahel's own populations and their perceptions regarding the development of the crisis. This concept has been inherited from our colonial adventure." Avoiding to judge this "adventure", the General continued by referencing 'French know-how'

"*This obstinate counter-terrorism policy in Mali and the Sahel has long shown its limits, and it could be argued that it has only worsened the situation.*"

inherited through colonial conquests "from Gallieni to Lyautey", during which counter-insurgency thought was developed. In the past as it is today, he argued, victory consists of "winning the hearts and minds of the populations to whose aid we come in the regions we seek to stabilize."[7]

International military engagement in the Sahel[8] is rooted in this theoretical framework. Its construction is based on counter-insurgency thinking largely inspired from French military experiences in Africa, nevertheless adapted by experiences gained during NATO operations in Afghanistan.[9] Tactically and operationally, the French military and its allies speak of counter or anti-terrorist missions, but the strategy is inspired by counterinsurgency theory. French military officers as much as their UN counterparts openly speak of securing populations and developing zones of stability like "oil spots" from which it would be possible to construct or consolidate peace, notably through working to spatially spread such spaces in order to control larger sections of territory.[10] Continually making reference to the security-development nexus is the hallmark of their discourse: the military creates space for development practitioners and political solutions while the latter take advantage of military successes and comply with the requirements of military strategy. As declared by General Lecointre, "military gains we obtain will be worth nothing if they don't result in political agreements and tangible actions leading to economic and social development."[11] The G5 Sahel Joint Force is conceived on the logic of the security-development nexus, which remains to this day "wishful thinking [that] nobody seems to know how to make happen on the ground."[12]

## The Limits of Counterinsurgency
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Counterinsurgency, conceived and presented as a military doctrine and a theory of practice in military operations, has a controversial history in military settings.[13] The principles it promotes, for instance the primacy of politics, the need for development gains, and the centrality of tight civil-military relations, are now cliché of the genre.[14] Nevertheless, as Jean-Hervé Jezequel reminds us, in as much as everyone knows that we must find and implement political solutions, "few have drawn concrete consequences for how military action and political action should be co-articulated.. [while] military contingents advance... development has stalled and governance components continue to lag far behind."[15]

It would do well to consider counterinsurgency as a philosophy or a mode of governance.[16] For Patricia Owens, the essence of counterinsurgency thinking is the production of governable populations. Counterinsurgency practices disseminate norms, rules, and limits in terms of governance. Stated otherwise, counterinsurgency wars promote and impose a distinct type of governance and rule.[17] To win hearts and minds is to conceive of populations as much as a vulnerable social body, at risk and to be protected, as it is a body from which risks, dangers and threats emerge.[18]

Thus, military operations should not be viewed as technical activities distinct from the political sphere, which (according to theory) facilitates the development of a space and time for political action. Rather, military strategy must be considered in its action and its political consequences, at least if one hopes to understand its failures and its limits in Mali and the Sahel.

First, Barkhane forces enrolled non-state armed groups,[19] for example GATIA and the MSA, in their counter-terrorist operations. Central and northern Mali are now governed by various armed groups of varied legitimacy. Links between these groups, and between them and the state have certainly diverged and fluctuated since the crisis' inception, but it is clear that Barkhane has contributed to some of their coercive power and the moral authority.[20]

It is well-established that one of the effects of these counter-terrorism collaborations has been an increase in inter-communal tensions.[21] However, the consequences of Barkhane's counterinsurgency pragmatism extend beyond the rise of local tensions. As in Somalia,[22] counterinsurgency practice has contributed to the fragmentation of the Malian national territory. Spheres of influence more or less officially recognized have been established and consolidated



*Malian soldier, Ansongo, Mali.*

> *"Military interventions (and development) condition the majority, if not all, national relations of power: negotiations and pacts between elites, patronage systems, multi-party elections, resource management, the development and consolidation of government institutions, constitutional reforms, and more."*

through these actions (Kidal, Ménaka, etc.). Each of these spaces is governed by particularized rules and norms, a form of governance sustained through para-military actions and forces, and power concentrated in the hands of dominant elites that shape a war-time political-economy rooted in transnational trafficking and international counter-terrorism rents.

In other words, the "Global Approach" as practiced in Mali facilitates the construction and consolidation of local and regional political orders of violence. While such political orders are always in construction and are locally contested, their existence is certainly in contradiction to the stated objectives of restoring the authority of the Malian state, maintaining its territorial integrity, and the political work of facilitating national reconciliation. The political field and spaces of intervention that counterinsurgency theory supposedly preserves and secures in order to build and consolidate peace are in fact fundamentally transformed, therein producing political dynamics that evade counterinsurgency practice.

These transformations eliminate, or at least diminish needs and motivations to engage in political negotiation or to implement any sort of peace agreement. Instead, a 'counter-terror' war economy is being developed. French officers speak of accompanying African troops for another 20 to 30 years, since their professional development and training will be long and since terrorism cannot be vanquished. The distinctive characteristic of "the Global Approach" is its perpetuity in the name of fighting terrorism. In this context, counterinsurgency cannot resolve conflict since it requires an unending military engagement in order to manage instability.[23] It becomes a mode of governance through

which international military operations become integral parts of Sahelian states.

# Conclusion

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While France stubbornly pursues its military strategy of unending war, it is astonished and offended by a resulting rise in "anti-French" sentiment in Mali.[24] This strategic stubbornness is supported, or at least tolerated, by the UN Security Council and its African, European and American allies. At the Pau Summit, Emmanuel Macron demanded a confirmation of support from Sahelian states for Barkhane, rather than initiating or encouraging a serious discussion between attending Heads of state on how to develop precise definitions of political objectives that must be achieved.

In this context it is difficult to not discuss the stalemate Barkhane faces. The fact that the Pau Summit's main takeaway was the need to focus on the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region and on the Islamic State in the Grand Sahara clearly is not the solution. Perhaps such a move will enable other armed groups to reconcile with the Malian state,[25] as Dioncounda Traoré's call seems to imply,[26] but this remains conjecture at this point in time.[27] Such thinking similarly amounts to believing in the premise on which the "Global Approach" is based: counterinsurgency creates, through military action, political possibilities and solutions.

Global counterinsurgency governance understands politics as an activity that occurs within the State, involving only internal/na-

tional/local solutions, leaving military activities to be conceived as external, foreign and technical solutions. Military interventions (and development) condition the majority, if not all, national relations of power: negotiations and pacts between elites, patronage systems, multi-party elections, resource management, the development and consolidation of government institutions, constitutional reforms, and more. Military questions are therefore intrinsically connected to the political. Military logic does not precede politics sequentially through the establishment of a monopoly of the use of violence that authorizes politics. Instead, military intervention conditions, dictates, and imposes limits on the political.

Undoubtedly, the beginning of a solution must come from Bamako,[28] or develop out of an African reflection that fully considers a continental perspective.[29] Nevertheless, any so-called political solution must first free itself from the counterinsurgency security paradigm and its colonial heritage and, more generally, from the international obsession with stabilization as the only horizon for international conflict management.

[1] I wish to thank Jonathan Sears, Adam Sandor and Maxime Ricard for their generous comments and suggestions to this piece.

[2] Bruno Charbonneau et Jonathan Sears, 2014. "Faire la guerre pour un Mali démocratique: l'intervention militaire française et la gestion des possibilités politiques contestées", *Revue canadienne de science politique* 47(3) : pp. 597-619. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423914000924

[3] International Crisis Group, *Parler aux jihadistes au centre du Mali : le dialogue est-il possible ?* Bruxelles : Rapport Afrique 276, 28 mai 2019. Since 2017, Centre FrancoPaix reports have proposed engaging in political dialogue as a possibility to explore, while the Malian state secretly pursued this option under the leadership of Prime Minister Abdoulaye Idrissa Maïga. See Aurélie Campana, *Entre déstabilisation et enracinement local : les groupes djihadistes dans le conflit malien depuis 2015*, Montréal : Centre FrancoPaix, Chaire Raoul-Dandurand, 2018.

[4] Bruno Charbonneau, 2019. "Faire la paix au Mali: les limites de l'acharnement contre-terroriste", *Revue canadienne des études africaines* 53(3) : pp.447-462. DOI : https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2019.1666017 ; International Crisis Group, *Frontière Niger-Mali : mettre l'outil militaire au service d'une approche politique*, Bruxelles : Rapport Afrique 261, 12 June 2018.

[5] I do not identify specific political solutions since when these are mentioned, they often remain incredibly vague. The 2015 Accords are often understood as a political solution, although some propose engaging in dialogue with jihadist groups.

[6] Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritanie, Niger, Tchad.

[7] Assemblée nationale (France), *Compte rendu 12, Commission des affaires étrangères*, 6 November 2019.

[8] Here I include all of military commitments: MINUSMA, Barkhane, EUTM, G5 Sahel, European and American forces in Niger and elsewhere, while recognizing the central strategic role played by French military operations which influence and structure the various military strategies of its allies and partners.

[9] The influence of counterinsurgency, as deployed in Afghanistan in particular, is either implicit or fully recognized by military officers. Observations or interviews with more than 20 American, French, Dutch, German or Canadian officers deployed in Mali, between 2015 and 2019.

[10] Bruno Charbonneau, 2019. "Intervention as Counterinsurgency Politics", *Conflict, Security and Development*, 19(3): pp. 309-314. DOI : https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2019.1608017

[11] Assemblée nationale (France), *Compte rendu 12, Commission des affaires étrangères*, 6 November 2019.

[12] Nicolas Desgrais, "La force conjointe du G5 Sahel, nouveau mythe de Sisyphe?", *The Conversation* , 17 July 2018.

[13] Douglas Porch, 2013. *Counterinsurgency : Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[14] For example, see David Kilcullen, 2010. *Counterinsurgency*, New York: Oxford University Press.

[15] Jean-Hervé Jezequel, *Engager le dialogue au Sahel : à Pau un revirement stratégique est nécessaire*, Bruxelles : Commentary, International Crisis Group, 13 January 2020.

[16] Charbonneau, "Intervention as Counterinsurgency Politics".

[17] Patricia Owens, 2015. *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[18] Thanks to Jonathan Sears for this formulation.

[19] Operation Barkhane appears to have ended this practice in the summer of 2019.

[20] Rémi Carayol, "Mali : les troupes de l'opération Barkhane prennent leurs distances avec les ex-rebelles touaregs", *Jeune Afrique*, 26 September 2016.

[21] Cédric Jourde, Marie Brossier et Modibo Ghaly Cissé, 2019. "Prédation et violence au Mali : élites statutaires peules et logiques de domination dans la région de Mopti", *Revue canadienne des études africaines* 53(3) : pp.431-446. DOI : https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2019.1666016

[22] See Louise Wiuff Moe, 2018. "Counter-insurgency in the Somali territories: between peace and pacification", *International Affairs* 94(2): 319-342. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix250

[23] When the generals speak of a French engagement of 20 to 30 years, I consider such a horizon to be "permanent". See remarks of General Lecointre: Assemblée nationale (France), *Compte rendu 12, Commission des affaires étrangères*, 6 November 2019.

[24] Interview with Boubacar Traoré, "Le Sommet de Pau et l'approbation de l'opération Barkhane vus depuis le Mali", *IRIS*, 22 January 2020.

[25] I thank Adam Sandor for explaining this point.

[26] « Mali : Dioncounda Traoré, haut représentant du président de la république pour les régions du centre : "Je suis prêt à travailler avec tout le monde, y compris Kouffa et Iyad..." *Malijet*, 25 January 2020.

[27] Between the publication of the French original version of this article and its English translation, Malian president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta announced that his government would from now on officially negotiated with the jihadist groups of Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Kouffa.

[28] Judd Devermont, "Politics at the Heart of the Crisis in the Sahel", *CSIS Briefs*, 6 December 2019.

[29] Niagalé Bagayoko, "Sahel : Il faut repenser la sécurité du continent selon une perspective stratégique africaine", *Le Monde*, 10 January 2020.

# Guinea: Legislative elections between boycotts and risks of violence

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In light of the profound political dissensions the country has experienced since 2019 around the President's constitutional reform project and legislative elections scheduled for February 2020, the situation in Guinea is certainly worrying. Whether or not a referendum will be held on the issue of constitutional reform will depend on the country holding legislative elections, which requires the agreement and participation of the National Assembly to organize them. If the constitutional reform project were to be adopted, it would theoretically allow President Alpha Condé to run for a third term. Even if he has yet to clearly take a firm position on the matter, the opposition still considers the reform project to be a decoy for Condé to retain power.

The political opposition has therefore decided to boycott legislative elections. Political parties have indeed regularly complained about the ineffectiveness of the Independent National Electoral Commission, and in the past the opposition has denounced the electoral management body on the grounds of bias. But this is the first time that the main opposition parties, the Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea (UFDG) and the Union of Republican Forces (UFR), have resolutely joined forces to prevent elections from being held. At the base of their decision was the complicated issue of the national electoral register: the opposition denounced irregularities and accused the ruling party, the Guinea People's Rally, of massively enrolling minors on the electoral lists in its fiefs, thus increasing the electoral body by nearly 8 million voters in a country with a total population of 12 million.

In his address to the nation on 31 December 2019, President Condé severely increased national tensions by inviting the Minister of Justice to disclose the contents of the draft new constitution. At present, and as openly presented in a Council of Ministers' report dated 24 January 2020, the opposition's position is shaped by the will of the president to establish a new constitution which would allow him, in theory, to seek a third mandate, whereas the current constitution limits presidential terms to two. United under a coalition named the National Front for the Defense of the Constitution (FNDC), the

opposition, represented by the UFDG and the UFR, thus far aims to hold fair, inclusive, and credible legislative elections in order to prevent the constitutional reform from occurring.

Since Guinea's partisan cleavages are historically reinforced by the ethnic composition of the country's political parties, processes of political dialogue are rendered very difficult, which thereby weakens any hopes for the construction of a national political community. In this context, the holding of elections will vary greatly depending on the current composition of a riding's current political support: in municipalities held by the ruling regime, it will be difficult to implement a boycott. On the other hand, in opposition strongholds, the situation will be more difficult and will certainly affect local electoral participation rates.

While the boycott may be a boon for regime supporters offering the possibility of establishing a parliamentary majority, it is however very problematic for the credibility of the elections and the representativeness of the National Assembly. Without mentioning potential risks for electoral violence, at minimum the political situation can result in a democratic setback, like that experienced recently in Benin. If anything, Guinea will most likely continue the West African trend of degrading hopes for democratic political turnover.

# NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

→ **Bruno Charbonneau & Adam Sandor**

edited a special issue in the journal Civil Wars on the "The Politics of Comparing Armed Conflicts." They wrote an introduction entitled "Power and Comparative Methods: Performing the Worlds of Armed Conflicts." In the same issue, Bruno Charbonneau wrote an article "Privileged Sphere of Comparison: Empire, Methods and Conflict Intervention".

→ **Adib Bencherif**

published "La violence politique au Sahel : une hydre de l'insécurité en construction" in the latest issue of *Les Grands dossiers de Diplomatie* devoted to the state of conflicts in the world.

→ **Émile Ouédraogo**

published "L'admission des Etats dans les organisations internationales", in the journal *Afrilex, Revue d'étude et de recherche sur le droit et l'administration dans les pays d'Afrique.*

→ **Maxime Ricard**

presented "La fabrique sociopolitique de l'ordre entre négociations et tensions : les chasseurs dozos dans l'Ouest ivoirien" as part of the round table organized at Laval University, "Enjeux fonciers, privatisation de la violence et État contesté en Afrique de l'ouest (Mali, Burkina Faso et Côte d'Ivoire) ", on 5 february 2020.
He also spoke on the BBC World Service radio programme Newsday about the arrest warrant for Guillaume Soro in Côte d'Ivoire, on 24 December 2019.

→ **Niagalé Bagayoko**

published in the newspaper *Le Monde* the article "Il faut repenser la sécurité du continent selon une perspective stratégique africaine", and in Vanguard "Security in Africa: Beyond the colonial and post-colonial frameworks".

She spoke on 20 December 2019 in the radio programme *Le temps du débat* on *France Culture*, « Qui veut encore de la France au Sahel ? », and she did two television appearances on TV5 monde in 13 december 2020, *Émission 64 minutes* and *le Journal de l'Afrique*. She also intervened on the United nations radio in Mali *Mikado FM*, on 14 January 2020.



*Soldiers of the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa)*

**The Centre FrancoPaix in Conflict Resolution and Peace missions** aims to promote scientific research, academic training and the development of conflict resolution research in the Francophonie.