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“Western Bucks for Sahelian Boots What makes counterterrorism security force assistance work?”

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“On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it” Matteo Mirolo

Abstract:

This thesis asks what makes counterterrorism security force assistance work, by studying the context of counterterrorism in the Sahel since 2007. The Western case-studies are the United States and France and the local ones are Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger. I argue that counterterrorism security force assistance creates a dysfunctional relationship between the major power and the local partner. Successful cooperation—i.e. an efficient relationship with minimal interest divergence between the two partners—is the result of three factors: first, the major power’s ability to put in place a credible conditionality framework; second, the local partner’s capacity and, thirdly, willingness to comply with the major power’s agenda.

Abstrakt:

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht, inwiefern die Unterstützung von Sicherheitskräften bei der Terrorismusbekämpfung Einfluss nimmt, indem sie den Kontext der Terrorismusbekämpfung im Sahel seit 2007 untersucht. Analysierte westliche Fallstudien sind die Vereinigten Staaten sowie Frankreich, lokale Fallstudien sind wiederum Burkina Faso, Tschad, Mali und Niger. Im Zuge dieser Arbeit wird argumentiert, dass die Unterstützung der Sicherheitskräfte bei der Terrorismusbekämpfung eine dysfunktionale Beziehung zwischen der Großmacht und dem lokalen Partner schafft. Der Erfolg - eine effiziente Beziehung, welche die vollständige Einhaltung der Vorschriften durch den Agenten bei minimaler Divergenz gewährleistet - kann auf folgende drei Faktoren zurückgeführt werden: erstens die Fähigkeit der Großmacht, einen glaubwürdigen Rahmen für Konditionalität zu schaffen; zweitens die Kapazität des lokalen Partners und drittens die Bereitschaft, die Agenda der Großmacht einzuhalten.

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Introduction:

“Operations are to be carried out by partnered security forces, with partnered security forces based on their operational needs, and through cooperative relationships in which [we play] a supporting role. This grand strategy is based on the motive to find African solutions to African problems.”—Gen. Thomas D. Waldhauser, Commander of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), testifying in front of the House Armed Services Committee.¹

“The West’s strategic approach to countries like Chad, to the extent that it ever had one, has been paradoxical: in pursuing stability, it strengthened the autocrat, but in strengthening the autocrat, it enabled him to further abuse his position, exacerbating the conditions that lead people to take up arms.”—Ben Taub, *The New Yorker*.²

In the aftermath of the heavy losses suffered during the American operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and due to fear of endless land wars,³ practitioners of the traditional ‘boots on the ground’ policy are increasingly turning to an light footprint approach to countering jihadist insurgents such as Al-Qaeda or Daesh by, with and through local partners. In this context, the success of counterterrorism security force assistance (SFA), defined as an efficient relationship which ensures minimal interest divergence between the two partners, is truly a two-way street that depends as much on the impetus of the major power as on the cooperation of the local partner. This thesis will research what makes counterterrorism security force assistance work by studying the case of the Sahel since the creation of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) around 2007.

Counterterrorism security force assistance creates a dysfunctional relationship between the major power and local partner. Its success is the result of three factors: first, the major power’s capacity to put in place a credible conditionality framework; second, the local partner’s capacity and, thirdly, willingness to comply with the major power’s agenda. In the first chapter, I review the literature informing my research and give a detailed account of the theoretical framework and the methodology that guide this work. The remaining three chapter follows the aforementioned three variables. In the second chapter, I discuss the strategies guiding the French and U.S. SFA policies in the Sahel and analyze their repercussions on the two countries’ capacity to impose credible conditionality. In the third and fourth chapter, I turn to a study of the four Sahelian case studies. I first discuss the various conditions that constrain their capacity to engage in meaningful

¹ Waldhauser, T. (2018, March). Testimony in front of the House Armed Services Committee.

² Taub, B. (2019, February 22). A shadow rebellion in Chad. *The New Yorker*.

³ Schmitt, E. (May, 29 2014). U.S. Strategy to Fight Terrorism Increasingly Uses Proxies. *The New York Times*.

counterterrorism and capacity-building. Then, I analyze their interest alignment with their Western partners and show the impact that this has on their willingness to deliver on their end of the counterterrorism bargain.

I have chosen case studies that are representative of the issues at hand. On the side of the SFA provider, it is fair to say that both France and the United States are calling the shots of the Western SFA effort in the Sahel. The United States remains the operational, financial and political driver of the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT) and its contribution to counterterrorism in the Sahel is in the hundreds of millions. France, albeit originally being a smaller player on the GWOT scene, has raised its operational profile since the tragic terror attacks that have plagued its territory in recent years. More importantly, its involvement in the Sahel is significant, not least because of the troops that it has deployed as part of operations Serval and Barkhane since January 2013. Whilst both France and the US are prominent SFA practitioners, their involvement in the Sahel is therefore not exactly similar: by contrast to France's 4,500 troops on the ground engaged in direct and autonomous operations against Jihadist insurgents, the U.S. follows a clearer SFA framework with no autonomous operations on the ground but with a comprehensive program to train, equip and assist local forces. Nevertheless, because 4,500 troops in an area larger than Europe still qualifies as light footprint and France's priorities still lies in the capacity-building of local forces, I argue that the U.S. and France are comparable in their military engagement in the Sahel, because they both use the strategic framework of SFA. On the side of the SFA recipients, my case studies are Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. Mali distinguishes itself from the other cases because a greater part of its territory is controlled by armed insurgents—whether Jihadists or not—and the original goal of the French intervention was to help the Malian state regain control of these territories; therefore, Mali could have been treated as a stand-alone case study. However, the degradation of the security situation in Burkina Faso and Niger in recent years as well as the significant involvement of Chadian troops in Mali means that the Sahel needs to be approached as a whole because the terrorist threats it faces—and the military responses that these trigger—are transnational. Here, I should acknowledge that, while geographically, the Sahel constitutes a belt that goes from Cape Verde to Somalia, I have chosen to give it a more political definition, as the area of the G5 Sahel cooperation framework, which is sometimes called western Sahel. Mauritania, however, is not one of this thesis' case studies. Indeed, while it takes an active role in the G5 Sahel and its joint force, the Mauritanian security forces have up until now been able to keep the terrorist threat outside of their territory.

Furthermore, Mauritania does not host any Western troops. Therefore, the country would not have lent itself to a comparison with its neighbors on counterterrorism SFA.

My work is much indebted to the many scholars that are cited throughout and has strived to rest on the shoulder of these academic giants by contributing towards the scholarship on post 9/11 counterterrorism SFA. First, many of the sixty-two practitioners and scholars that I have met had never previously been interviewed, which means that one of this thesis' main contributions lies in the introduction of new primary sources. Furthermore, the diversity of my interviewees means that I have been exposed to many points of views. Second, through my detailed and multi-sectorial analysis of the politics of the French involvement in the Sahel, I also advocate for a relatively novel point: while it is important to give even more attention to the local partner's political context of SFA, it is crucial not to lose sight of the fact that the major power's context is also highly important in determining its ability to construct a credible conditionality framework. Third, this thesis is another contribution to the growing literature shedding light on the ability of African regimes to shape global narratives and therefore to display significant agency in their relationships with more senior partners. While this research had originally intended to explore further the construction of 'global political capital' by Sahelian states through their involvement in counterterrorism, I unfortunately lacked resources to pursuing field research in the Sahel. However, my many interviews with defense attachés in the United States and France and with researchers in the Sahel as well as my participation as research assistant to a UNITAR training mission for the Malian Armed Forces mean that I have nonetheless been able to conduct some primary research from an African perspective.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the academics at Stanford University and at the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, with whom I had interesting and stimulating discussions on my research project. I am also indebted to my dissertation supervisor at the Academy, Professor Markus Kornprobst, and to my 'second reader' at Stanford, Professor Martha Crenshaw, for their guidance.

Chapter 1: Theory

1.1. Debates

In answer to my research question “what makes counterterrorism security force assistance work?” the first task at hand is to review the policy and academic literature, see how they define the terms of my question and analyze the theoretical framework through which they discuss them.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) defines terrorism as comprising three elements:

“the perpetration of a criminal act (such as murder, kidnapping, hostage-taking, arson, and so on), or threatening such an act; (ii) the intent to spread fear among the population (which would generally entail the creation of public danger) or directly or indirectly coerce a national or international authority to take some action, or to refrain from taking it; (iii) when the act involves a transnational element.”⁴

In this sense, terrorism is a criminal tactic that uses fear to achieve political aims, and counterterrorism encompasses the measures used to combat it. Security Force Assistance (SFA) is defined by the U.S. government as “unified action to generate, employ, and sustain local, host nation or regional security forces in support of a legitimate authority.”⁵ Its closest synonym in French, *Partenariat Militaire Opérationnel* (PMO) is defined by the French government as a “crisis prevention tool aimed at sustaining and accompanying partner forces [...] in the struggle against armed terrorist groups and to help them to acquire the capacity to autonomously ensure their security.”⁶

A contradiction that appeared early on in this research is between the aforementioned policy makers’ definitions and the way in which International Relations scholars conceive counterterrorism partnership. Indeed, in its discussion of the dynamics of counterterrorism security force assistance, scholarship tends to criticize these operational and tactical definitions for being over-simplistic and missing important points. As Biddle, MacDonald & Baker explain, “the policy debate often sees SFA

⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (undated). Defining Terrorism.

<https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-4/key-issues/defining-terrorism.html> (Retrieved 09/06/2019).

⁵ Chairman of the Joints Chief of Staff. (2008). Commander’s Handbook for Security Force Assistance. *Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance*. Fort Leavenworth, KA.

⁶ Ministère des Armées. (2019). BARKHANE : Focus sur le Partenariat Militaire Opérationnel (PMO). *État-major des Armées*.

as a form of apolitical capacity building in which military aid ought to increase partner effectiveness in a simple, straightforward way, and where its apparent cost-effectiveness makes small efforts seem attractive as a cheap way to bolster allies with limited US commitment.”⁷ For Walter Ladwig, “all too often, the task of strengthening a partner’s military is seen as a narrow technical undertaking focused on the provision of equipment and training.”⁸ Mara Karlin makes a similar point in her book, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States*, by arguing that policy makers underestimate the true scope of the security force assistance task.⁹ Instead, these scholars propose adopting a political perspective to counterterrorism partnerships. Stephen Tankel, in his latest book, *With Us and Against Us*, “situates [the] analysis of counterterrorism cooperation in the general framework of theories of alliances and foreign policy, rather than treating it in isolation.”¹⁰ Tankel explains that some countries—Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Mali and Pakistan in his own study—“are both firefighters and arsonists [...] And while cooperation with them is crucial, it has been exceedingly difficult, whether because of state weakness, conflicting interests, or outright duplicity.”¹¹

While there is indeed a common acknowledgment amongst these scholars that there are numerous pitfalls to counterterrorism partnerships that hinder their efficiency, scholars differ on the causes that they ascribe to this, and, therefore, to the solutions that they envisage. A first strand of scholarship bases itself on alliance theory and situates the difficulties of counterterrorism partnership in interest misalignment between partners. According to Biddle, Macdonald & Baker, SFA involves “large interest misalignments between the provider and the recipient.”¹² Indeed, it is important to mention that while on the surface counterterrorism may seem to be a consensual policy objective for any government, the interests of weak regimes dictate otherwise. As Andrew Boutton argues, regimes “involved in an ongoing interstate rivalry will use the aid to arm against their rival, rather than to engage in counterterrorism.”¹³ Second, weak regimes that do not suffer from external threats will turn inwards and may use SFA resources to make their regime ‘coup-

⁷ Biddle, S., Macdonald, J., & Baker, R. (2018). Small footprint, small payoff. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41, nos. 1-2, 89-142, p. 94.

⁸ Ladwig, W. (2019, March 29). The Politics of Security Assistance to Fragile States. In Fritz, J. (eds) *Building Militaries in Fragile States*. *Texas National Security Review*.

⁹ Karlin, M. (2017). *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

¹⁰ Crenshaw, M. (2018). Counterterrorism Partnerships: A Two-Way Street. in Book Review Roundtable: America’s Hot and Cold Relationship with Its Counterterrorism Partners. *Texas National Security Review*.

¹¹ Chollet, D. (2018). Introduction: A Timely Assessment of U.S. Counterterrorism Partnerships. in Book Review Roundtable: America’s Hot and Cold Relationship with Its Counterterrorism Partners. *Texas National Security Review*.

¹² Biddle, S., Macdonald, J., & Baker, R. (2018). Small footprint, small payoff. P. 94

¹³ Boutton, A. (2014) ‘U.S. Foreign Aid, Interstate Rivalry, and Incentives for Counterterrorism Cooperation,’ *Journal of Peace Research*, P. 1.

proof', by arming an elite presidential guard. This will often come to the detriment of creating a capable army or law enforcement body because, as Biddle, Macdonald & Baker argue, "the kind of powerful, politically independent, technically proficient, noncorrupt military the US seeks is often seen by the partner state as a far greater threat to their self-interest than foreign invasion or terrorist infiltration."¹⁴ In these two cases, "these states thus have incentive not to crack down on terrorism, but rather to play-up the threat of terrorism in their countries in order to continue receiving aid concessions. "¹⁵ Based on this diagnosis that interest misalignments can cause inefficiencies, this strand of scholarship advocates for more research by policy makers on the local context, so as to reduce the interest misalignment. As Tankel argues, "it is critical to comprehend the security paradigm that drives a partner's decision-making, how relations with the terrorists that are the target of cooperation fit into that paradigm, and how U.S. policies influence the political and security challenges the partner faces."¹⁶

A second strand in scholarship argues that in the case of counterterrorism partnership, interests are structurally misaligned and so cannot be artificially re-aligned. Indeed, for scholars such as Jacob Shapiro¹⁷ it would be over-simplistic to assume that SFA is simply a disinterested partnership framework geared towards the sole benefit of those nations at the receiving end. The full meaning of SFA cannot be understood without giving due attention to the light footprint approach which many Western militaries have adopted after several disastrous post-9/11 operations. SFA is also, and perhaps primarily, there to reduce Western personnel exposure. SFA is the result of a strategy aimed at working by, with and through local partners to ensure the security of a third country's citizens, interests and homeland. Therefore, what major powers effectively do is that they delegate counterterrorism and its associated activities to their local partners. As Berman & Lake put it, they are in a logic of indirect control and work through local proxies.¹⁸ Furthermore, major powers face "difficult monitoring challenges and difficult conditions for enforcement" which in turn lead to "interest asymmetry, information asymmetry, moral hazard and adverse selection."¹⁹

¹⁴ Biddle, S., Macdonald, J., & Baker, R. (2018). Small footprint, small payoff. P. 100.

¹⁵ Boutton, A. (2014) 'U.S. Foreign Aid, Interstate Rivalry, and Incentives for Counterterrorism Cooperation,' p. 1

¹⁶ Tankel, S. (2018). *With Us and Against Us. How America's Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, Introduction.

¹⁷ Shapiro, J. (2018). America and Its Counterterrorism Partners: A Principal-Agent Relationship. in Book Review Roundtable: America's Hot and Cold Relationship with Its Counterterrorism Partners. *Texas National Security Review*.

¹⁸ Berman, E., & Lake, D. (Forthcoming). *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.97

As Mir argues, it is also very difficult to measure counterterrorism efficiency²⁰, not least because of the secrecy of operations. As a result, these scholars propose conceptualizing counterterrorism partnerships through an organizational economics approach, as a principal-agent (PA) problem. Success, therefore, is not so much about treating the local partner as an ally on an equal footing and trying to find an alignment of interests—as was advocated by the scholars discussed before—as to ensuring the agent’s compliance to the principal’s interests. As Shapiro argues, “securing [the agent’s cooperation] requires the principal to create strong incentives for the agent to comply with its demands. And it is in thinking about how to create such incentives, that the agency theory approach pays greatest dividends.”²¹ Thus, in finding solutions to the inefficiencies of counterterrorism cooperation, Shapiro, Berman and Lake put an emphasis on the tools at the major power’s disposal to ensure the agent’s compliance, such as the conditionality of SFA to successful completion of work.

Finally, another literature debate came useful in crafting this thesis’ theoretical framework and regards the discussion around African agency in the context of the process of securitization of development, which affected Western political relationship with Africa since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.²² Rita Abrahamsen explains that the British government sees “the ‘war on terrorism’ and the ‘war on poverty’ are two sides of the same coin.”²³ Hagmann & Reyntjens argue that securitization saw “a noticeable redirection of the aid effort towards countries considered of strategic importance and/or affected by conflict.”²⁴ Beal, Goodfellow & Putzel show that even international organization have adopted securitization as the prime strategy governing their programs in Africa.²⁵ This notion of securitization led to an interesting scholarly debate. On the one hand, some see securitization as a ‘one-way’ process, i.e. as a policy that the West imposes on Africa. Indeed, “one of the characteristics of contemporary development assistance is an unashamed acknowledgement that it must serve the national security interest of donors”²⁶ or other domestic political considerations. For example, in the case of Britain, where “at a time of intense debate and fierce opposition to the government’s policies, the securitization of Africa can thus be seen as part

²⁰ Mir, A. (2018). What Explains Counterterrorism Effectiveness? *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 2, pp. 45–83

²¹ Shapiro, J. (2018). America and Its Counterterrorism Partners: A Principal-Agent Relationship.

²² Mirolo, M. (2017). FROM STATE SECURITY TO REGIME SECURITY. Exploring the relationship between the securitization of development and regime security through the case study of counter-terrorism in Chad. *Unpublished*.

²³ Abrahamsen, R. (2004). A breeding ground for terrorists? Africa & Britain's ‘war on terrorism.’ *Review of African Political Economy* 102 p. 683.

²⁴ Hagmann, Tobias, & Tobias Reyntjens. Aid and Authoritarianism in Africa. London: Zed Books, 2016, p. 31

²⁵ Beall, J., Goodfellow, T. & Putzel, J. (2006): On the Discourse of Terrorism, Security and Development. *Journal of International Development* 18, 51-67.

²⁶ Hagmann, Tobias, & Tobias Reyntjens. Aid and Authoritarianism in Africa. P. 31

of a political strategy to unify public and party support behind the government.”²⁷ However, other scholars include African agency into the definition and the enforcement of securitization as a new international norm. Indeed, securitization “has been reflected in emerging security regimes on the continent”²⁸ that have “eagerly embraced the securitization agenda, actively promoting its practice”²⁹ Also noteworthy is Jean-François Bayart’s theory of extraversion,³⁰ that is to say the original processes and strategies that have been invented by sub-Saharan African regimes to be in the driving seat of many of their relationships with the rest of the world and become the ‘subjects of their dependence’ from the global North.

1.2. Variables

From the literature discussed above, several aspects are very useful in constructing a theoretical framework to answer the research question. First, this thesis steers away from operational and tactical definitions of counterterrorism partnerships and adopts a political perspective to discuss it. Second, the alliance theory and organizational economics frameworks offer useful insights into the dynamics of counterterrorism partnerships. Alliance theory shows the need to look more at the local context, which I am studying by researching the capacities and willingness of the local actors. The organizational economics approach sheds light on the need to investigate the major power’s ability to ensure local compliance, which I am also including in my theory by looking at the U.S. and France’s ability to construct credible conditionality.

However, the literature presents some limitations that this theoretical framework has sought to find a solution to. First, it seems important to acknowledge the imperfection of the principal-agent model in the context of my subject. Indeed, whilst it is undoubtable that France and the United States have great stakes in the ability of their Sahelian partners to contain the terrorist threat, it is also unwise to imply that counterterrorism SFA in the Sahel is only a one-way street where all strings are being pulled from the Western ‘principal’. By devoting a significant portion of my empirical research to the preferences and constraints of the local partners and by discussing

²⁷ Abrahamsen, R. «A breeding ground for terrorists? Africa & Britain's 'war on terrorism'. P. 83

²⁸ Carmody, P. (2005). Transforming Globalization and Security. *Africa and America* 52, n. 1: 97-120.

²⁹ Fisher, J. & Anderson, D. (2015). Authoritarianism and the securitization of development in Africa. *International Affairs* 91, n. 1: p. 131

³⁰ Bayart, J.-F. (1999). L'Afrique dans le monde: une histoire d'extraversion. *Critique Internationale* 5, pp. 97-120.

their levels of global political capital, I have tried to demonstrate that the latter have a high level of agency in defining and driving the relationship with the major powers, both in advancing their interests to the detriment of their partner and even in shaping the global counterterrorism narrative. However, I also need to acknowledge the limitations in terms of interviews and data collection inherent to only having been able to conduct field research in France and the United States. In the conclusion, I outline an agenda for future research that should hopefully address some of these limitations. Second, the literature does not discuss enough the temporal variable in explaining counterterrorism partnership. There is indeed a significant difference between the short term (mostly military in nature) and long-term goals (that are more societal and developmental in nature) of counterterrorism. Third, the literature is relatively quiet on the influence of regime type on counterterrorism partnership. This is linked to my second point insofar as illiberal regimes have a real interest in steering the agenda to shorter term goals, to which they are better suited, as opposed to democracies, which perform better in societal work. I address both of these limitations by discussing the time and regime type variables in my analysis of the capacities and willingness of the local partners.

According to my theoretical framework, making counterterrorism SFA work—which I define as constructing an efficient relationship with minimal interest divergence—rests on three main variables. On the part of the major power, it depends on the latter's capacity to build and impose a credible conditionality framework. On the part of the local partner, it depends on the latter's capacity and willingness to address the terrorist threat and to engage in meaningful capacity-building to achieve long-term autonomy.

First, contrarily to the assumption according to which when SFA does not function, more money simply needs to be funneled into the operations, the major power must in fact provide incentives to the local partner for taking action by making its assistance dependent on the local partner's satisfactory completion. I therefore borrow from Biddle, MacDonald & Baker³¹ in my second chapter's analysis of the capacity of France and the U.S. to impose credible conditionality on their local partner. Conditionality amounts to a double promise of action: if the local partner does not deliver, the major power will suspend SFA, while if the former works, the latter will pay. An example of this is provided by the U.S. experience in post-Saddam Hussein's Iraq:

³¹ Biddle, S., Macdonald, J., & Baker, R. (2018). Small footprint, small payoff.

“In Iraq, for example, perhaps the most notable exception to the pattern of limited ISF [Iraqi Security Forces] improvement was a reduction in INP [Iraqi National Police] sectarianism during the 2007 Surge. This was accomplished by an atypical application of PA [principal-agent]-style incentive manipulation by US General David Petraeus and U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker. The major interest divergence between Nouri al-Maliki’s acceptance of Shiite sectarianism and U.S. opposition to it had led to the INP using American aid to fuel death-squad violence against Sunnis – a major case of shirking rather than working, from the American standpoint. To thwart this, Petraeus and Crocker identified sectarian INP brigade commanders and demanded that Maliki replace them. When Maliki refused, Petraeus and Crocker withheld gasoline, ammunition, water and spare parts from the INP units in question until Maliki complied, only then restoring logistical support.”³²

Conditionality is therefore not only a potent tool to ensure the local partner’s compliance, but also the only one at the disposal of the major power. However, conditionality is also hard to achieve because of issues related to credibility. Indeed, conditionality rests on the local partner trusting that the major power will deliver both on its threat to withhold assistance in case of disappointing work and on its promise of payment in case of satisfactory progress. This creates a clear case of moral hazard: the more the major power provides assurances of its promises to the local partner, the more the major power encourages the local partner not to believe in the threat of sanctions, and the more the major power does the opposite—i.e. provide signals that threats it emits are real—the more likely it will be that the local partner risks doubts the major power’s willingness to deliver on its promises. Therefore, building a credible conditionality framework is a real balancing game that rests on the building deep relationship where much is at stake on both sides. Most importantly, the major power should not become dependent on its relationship with the local partner: there should be a clear exit strategy on the part of the major power. Therefore, the second chapter will analyze how the U.S. and France’s preferences and constraints impact their ability to construct credible conditionality with their partners in the Sahel.

The second part of my theoretical framework regards the Sahelian states’ capacity and willingness to engage in both counterterrorism operations and capacity-building to ensure their self-reliance. In doing so, I have borrowed from rational-choice theory and its analysis of constraints and preferences,³³ which I have modified into capacity and willingness. The strength of the institutions and of the security forces are the determining factors in explaining the capacity to make use of SFA to engage in meaningful action. Indeed, states that do not have sufficiently functioning pre-existing security and institutional apparatuses are unable to efficiently make use of SFA resources, which

³² Biddle, S., Macdonald, J., & Baker, R. (2018). Small footprint, small payoff. P. 129.

³³ Ulen, T. (1999). RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY IN LAW AND ECONOMICS. *Encyclopedia of law and economics*.

leads to a dysfunctional relationship. The local partner's willingness to take meaningful action depends on two factors: first, its interest alignment with the major power. While a perfectly aligned agenda required neither reward nor punishment by the major power to encourage compliance, "when the policy objectives or the interests of the major power and proxy are highly dissimilar, resources provided by the major power will not be used by the proxy to suppress threats to the former, but rather to pursue priorities of the latter."³⁴ Second, willingness to engage in counterterrorism partnership depends on the ability of the local partners to have agency in the relationship. Indeed, local partners can have significant agency in shaping the counterterrorism narrative and thereby create incentives for the major powers to assist them. Local partners may also adopt more coercive measures to convince the major powers to provide assistance. The build-up of a 'global political capital' through counterterrorism rhetoric by some of the Sahelian case studies will therefore also be discussed in the last chapter.

Finally, regime type is an important aspect of the equation: as Beth Whitaker argues, "compliance is highest in countries with the least democratic institutions and minimal mobilization of domestic constituencies."³⁵ Indeed, democracies present the potential to mobilize groups that advocate against SFA because the latter could be perceived as foreign interference undermining national sovereignty. That being said, the weaknesses of democratic regimes in SFA implies that we situate ourselves in a short-term tactical framework in which successful SFA means the immediate compliance of the local partner to the major power's agenda. Democratic regimes might indeed not have the same rapid reaction capacity as regimes with no opposition, but they have many other strengths in counterterrorism. Indeed, my thesis analyzes counterterrorism SFA both in the short term—where what counts is rapid results in defeating terrorist insurgents—and from a longer-term approach—where what counts is a country's capacity to counter violent extremism and to independently cater for its security needs. In the latter case, democracies are naturally better suited to engage in meaningful structural and societal reform. Assessing the five Sahelian case studies through both of these time frames makes the results differ widely. Although this complicates the overall assessment of effective cooperation it also makes the analysis more multi-dimensional.

³⁴ Berman, E., & Lake, D. (Forthcoming). *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

³⁵ Whitaker, B. (2010). Compliance among weak states: Africa and the counter-terrorism regime. *Review of International Studies*, 36(3), p. 639.

1.3. Methodology

Regarding methodology, this thesis follows a qualitative research path. Indeed, much of the data produced in the Sahel is too unreliable to offer a solid basis for quantitative research. From September 2018 to June 2019, I have therefore completed sixty-two interviews with senior policy-makers, diplomats, officers, journalists and researchers, mainly during study trips to Washington, D.C. and Paris, France, but also during my exchange fellowship at Stanford University. Some interviews were also conducted by phone from Stanford, CA and Vienna, Austria. These interviews were conducted in a semi-structured style, mainly because of the highly confidential nature of my subject. This also explains why none of the interviewees are directly quoted in the text. Because the topic is sensitive, it required adaptation and flexibility in the questions that I asked. The names of those interviewees that agreed to appear in the bibliography and a list of the questions that I asked are outlined in annexes A and B. At this stage, I should mention two research limitations that are inherent in the choice of such a contemporary and politically sensitive subject as counterterrorism SFA in the Sahel. First, researching a largely confidential subject means that many of the sources that I would have needed for my research were simply inaccessible. Second, researching events that are still unfolding as I type these words means that secondary sources are sparse and that I sometimes had to navigate through uncharted territory.

As this high number of interviews shows, I have chosen an inductive research design for this thesis. As Melissa Dalton argues, “the provision of military aid is highly political and does not occur in a vacuum, unconnected to local political conflicts.”³⁶ My primary objective in this research has therefore been to shed light on the politics of counterterrorism SFA in the Sahel by showing how much its success depends on political conditions, both on the part of the major power and the local partner and how much a tailored approach is therefore needed to prepare SFA action plans. While it was only natural to dedicate most of my time to empirical research, my tri-partite theoretical framework has nonetheless allowed me to systematize my approach across case studies, and to enable my research to contribute to the wider discussion on SFA beyond the Sahel.

³⁶ Dalton, M. (2018). The Risks and Tradeoffs of Security Cooperation in "The Pros and Cons of Security Assistance". *Texas National Security Review*.

Chapter 2: French and U.S. Strategic Framework and its Impact on Conditionality

2.1. The United States

The U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS), which is the United States' most important set of defense guidelines, informs U.S. strategy regarding counterterrorism in the Sahel in two main ways. First, it states that "inter-state competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."³⁷ Terrorism is now deemed less of a threat than Russia, China, Iran and North Korea in terms of threat level. Secondly, Africa is only mentioned at the very end of the NDS, with no other military and security guidelines than "continue to work with partners [...]"³⁸ In contrast, guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region are four times longer, with a decisively bolder mention of a "forward military presence capable of deterring and, if necessary, defeating any adversary."³⁹ Indeed, as explained by a former Obama administration official, "there is a view in the U.S. that African affairs are not as vital to the balance of powers as other regions in the world like Europe or Asia."⁴⁰

The consequences of this strategic approach when it comes to the already anemic U.S. military involvement in Africa—the 6000 troops stationed in Africa is by far the smallest U.S. contingent worldwide and is due to be cut by 10% over the next few years⁴¹—is two-fold. First, the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM)—which is not even headquartered in Africa but in Stuttgart, Germany—is aligning itself on the new NDS by focusing its efforts on deterring and countering the presence of other great powers on the African continent.⁴² Second, because counterterrorism has been relegated to a lower priority level, whether the terrorist threat in the Sahel is a subject of strategic importance for the U.S. depends on whether it is considered to be an actual threat for homeland security.⁴³ In other words, "the Americans are not there to find solutions to the Sahel's problems with terrorism, they are there to protect their own territory."⁴⁴ Strikingly, U.S. analysts and policy-makers are quite unanimous in not considering the terrorist threat in the Sahel to be a

³⁷ The President of the United States of America (2018). Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America. Washington, D.C.

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 52-53

³⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 45-47

⁴⁰ interview with former senior U.S. policy-maker, Stanford, CA, 2018

⁴¹ Babb, C. (2019, February 28). 'We Are Not Winning' Counterterror War in Sahel, US Military Leader in Africa Says. Voice of America.

⁴² Interview with senior military commander, phone call, 2019.

⁴³ Interview with scholar, Washington, D.C., 2018; interview with former senior U.S. policy-maker, Stanford, CA, 2018

⁴⁴ Interview with scholar, Stanford, CA, 2018.

danger for their homeland security. As AFRICOM's commander General Waldhauser explained in a recent interview: "the threats that we are working on aren't necessarily a threat to the homeland and may not be a threat to the region overall."⁴⁵

The result of this overall strategy is that Africa has become an "economy of force theater"⁴⁶ in which the U.S. does not see many interests in getting involved. In the words of a former American policy-maker, "a strategic approach is lacking in Africa. It's either tactical or reactionary. We're doing damage control."⁴⁷ In Washington, D.C. itself, "no-one talks about Africa itself unless something really bad happens."⁴⁸ In February 2018, more than one year after President Trump's inauguration, thirteen African states still did not have any U.S. Ambassador—a figure higher than on any other continent—and the key position of Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs likewise remained vacant for over eighteen months, until former diplomat Tibor Nagy was taken out of retirement to fill it in July 2018. This situation is not only characteristic of the Trump administration. Indeed, as a former Obama administration official explains:

"In the National Security Council, Africa rarely was mentioned above the Interagency Policy Committee level (second-last of five levels of increasing responsibility within the NSC), while the Middle East files almost always landed on the President's desk [...] Africa was handled at a working level, which means both that you could not have fundamental changes in strategy [...] and that it is a lot less likely that people with an 'Africa-background' emerge in positions of responsibility."⁴⁹

It is also noteworthy that the ambush that claimed the lives of four U.S. special forces and five Nigeriens in October 2017 in Tongo Tongo, Niger also had a significant impact on decreasing the U.S. direct military engagement in Africa. Indeed, the event shocked the U.S. public—among which many were not even aware of their country's military involvement in Africa—and reminded it of another African disaster: the Battle of Mogadishu, Somalia in 1993.

Against the backdrop of this strategic context, the U.S. policy with regards to countering terrorism in the Sahel is therefore that of having as light a footprint as possible—and preferably 'no boots on the ground'—and working with local partners to tackle their threats as opposed to intervening themselves. As an expert of the region explained, "for someone like Trump, this is ideal:

⁴⁵ Babb, C. 'We Are Not Winning' Counterterror War in Sahel.

⁴⁶ Interview with an expert at a think tank, Washington, D.C., 2018.

⁴⁷ Interview with former senior policy-maker, Stanford, CA, 2018.

⁴⁸ Interview with French military commander, phone call, 2019.

⁴⁹ Interview with former U.S. senior policy-maker, Stanford, CA, 2018.

making local actors accountable and minimizing the risk to U.S. personnel.”⁵⁰ Gen. Waldhauser summed up this policy in a testimony in front of the House of Representatives’ Armed Services Committee: “Operations are to be carried out *by* partnered security forces, *with* partnered security forces based on their operational needs, and *through* cooperative relationships in which AFRICOM plays a supporting role. This grand strategy is based on the motive to find African solutions to African problems.”⁵¹ The amount of U.S. personnel in the Sahel is officially unspecified, but is probably below 1000, with Niger itself accounting for 800 troops, tasked with Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) missions, for example through drone operations.⁵² The amount of military aid is also not public, but has been estimated by journalists to be around \$242 millions.⁵³

It is important to note that the U.S. is the strictest foreign actor regarding the way in which it deals with its security force assistance (SFA) programs, or, as a European senior officer put it, “the Americans, when they lend you a car, they keep the key.”⁵⁴ As a U.S. senior officer in charge of training African forces explains:

“In the Sahel, we have learned a lot about how to avoid problems such as nepotism, or *ad hoc* groups that form just for the sake of training and then disperse. Basically, we ask trainees to commit to and sign a letter of agreement and we have a U.S. mentor assigned to them 24/7. By contrast, the E.U. training method is flawed, it is a sort of fire and forget thing. All they know is that they have trained one hundred guys, but they don’t have any idea who they are.”⁵⁵

The U.S. also imposes strict legislative guidelines on its security force assistance programs, which allows it to link more credible conditionality frameworks to its SFA programs. The so-called ‘Leahy-laws’ prohibit the Departments of State and Defense “from using funds or assistance to units of foreign security forces where there is credible information implicating that unit in the commission of gross violations of human rights.”⁵⁶ For example, in the case of Mali, all U.S. assistance programs going towards the improvement of the *Forces Armées Maliennes* have been interrupted after U.S. equipment was used during the summary execution of twenty *Bérets rouges* (the former presidential guard of Mali) at the time of the 2012 coup.⁵⁷ However, it is worth noting that while theoretically all training and cooperation are to be stopped in case of a coup, “it is perfectly possible

⁵⁰ Interview with an expert at a think tank, Washington, D.C., 2018.

⁵¹ Waldhauser, T. (2018). United States Africa Command 2018 Posture Statement.

⁵² Schmitt, E. (2019, March 1). Where Terrorism Is Rising in Africa and the U.S. Is Leaving. *The New York Times*.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Interview with European senior officer, phone call, 2019.

⁵⁵ Interview with a U.S. senior officer, Washington, D.C., 2018.

⁵⁶ United States Government. Leahy Fact Sheet. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State.

⁵⁷ Interview with an expert at a think tank, Washington, D.C., 2018.

to go around the Leahy-laws by using waivers, as is the case today in Marshal Al-Sisi's Egypt."⁵⁸ The fact that these rules are so diligently applied in the Sahel is perhaps just further testimony to the region's lack of strategic importance in the eyes of the Americans.

2.2. France

Similarly to the United States, the cornerstone of France's official policy in the Sahel is partnership: "to encourage the appropriation of the fight against terrorist armed groups by the G5 Sahel partner states."⁵⁹ In this vein, France stresses that everything that it does in the Sahel—from operation Serval to its support of the G5 Sahel troops—is the result of local initiative. In this sense, France's public strategy is to allow Sahelian states to "take care of their security in an autonomous fashion"⁶⁰ and its action is therefore complementary to theirs. Despite the apparently large size of its 4,500 troops contingent, in the context of a territory larger than Europe, Barkhane is also an example of light footprint.

However, where France and the United States strongly differ is in the highly strategic nature of countering terrorism in the Sahel for France. Indeed, by contrast to the United States' relegation of the threat of terrorism under that of inter-state rivalry, the major terrorist attacks that France has faced since 2012, and most notably in 2015, have led it to raise terrorism to the number one threat against its homeland security. Strikingly, the French *Livre Blanc défense et sécurité nationale*—the French equivalent of the U.S.' NDS—puts forward a "mutation of the security equation [...] with a continuum between internal security and external security, between problems of security and of defense."⁶¹ In other words, the French government's draws a line of strategic continuity between the domestic *Sentinelle* operation—an army deployment across France to deter and react to terrorist attacks—and the external Barkhane operation in the Sahel. Whether this is an actual operational strategy or "an attempt to give meaning to what [the French army does] *vis-à-vis* the public opinion"⁶² is open to discussion, but the defense and security *continuum* lies nonetheless at the heart of the French counterterrorism military engagement in the Sahel. Furthermore, it is worth noting that what Europeans fear perhaps most in a destabilization of the Sahel is the outbreak

⁵⁸ Interview with French diplomat, Paris, 2019.

⁵⁹ Ministère des Armées. (2019, February). Barkhane operation press kit.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Présidence de la République française (2013). *Livre Blanc Défense et Sécurité Nationale*. Paris: Direction de l'Information Légale et Administrative; Valls, M. (2016). Speech at the conference: « Le continuum Sécurité-Défense » Paris.

⁶² Interview with French senior officer, phone call, 2019.

of an uncontrollable flow of refugees. As one scholar puts it, “the whole European developmental agenda in the Sahel is about preventing black folks from crossing the Mediterranean”⁶³ and “migration has therefore been a key element in determining military policy for the French.”⁶⁴ Therefore, while both France and the United States seek to legitimize their external operations by appealing to the narrative of homeland security, France sees Africa, and in particular the Sahel, as an area of vital importance for French homeland security.

As one expert at a think tank explained, “the Sahel is to France what Mexico is to the United States.”⁶⁵ At a security level, geographic proximity means that governmental collapses in the Sahel would have direct consequences for France’s homeland, not to mention that “in 2013, it was observed that French nationals were starting to travel to Mali to train in terrorist camps.”⁶⁶ Indeed, the presence of large Sahelian diasporas in France—Mali’s ‘second-biggest city’ is Paris, for instance—further increases the risk of a disastrous contagion of Jihadi ideologies and terrorist plots among the French population. Therefore, the French government is not only firmly convinced that “France cannot afford having a zone of chaos in its neighborhood”⁶⁷, but also that “the Sahel is the first line of defense for France.”⁶⁸ At the level of French strategic culture, the Sahel has a significant historical and sentimental proximity to France. In his first speeches after the launch of the Serval operation, President Hollande spoke of a “form of solidarity between Francophone countries” as well as “the need for France to reimburse its debt towards the *tirailleurs sénégalais* [a contingent from all over French colonial Africa that contributed to the liberation of France during World War Two.]”⁶⁹ Additionally, French and Sahelian elites have a high level of proximity and togetherness. For example, Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita studied in France from age 13, worked in France for over ten years, and is a member of the Socialist International, which further reinforced his cultural and political links with fellow socialist François Hollande. French officers have a high level of familiarity with the Sahel, having often been deployed there numerous times. By contrast to the American approach of complete logistical autonomy in its external operations, adaptation and interaction with the local context is highly encouraged by the French military doctrine. As a former U.S. officer in Somalia explains:

⁶³ Interview with a scholar, Stanford, CA, 2018

⁶⁴ Interview with U.S. senior officer, Washington, D.C. 2018.

⁶⁵ Interview with an expert at a think tank, Washington, D.C., 2018.

⁶⁶ Interview with French senior policy-maker, Paris, 2019.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Interview with French senior policy-maker, Paris, 2019.

“When I was in Mogadisciu, in the U.S. base, we had been eating meals in plastic bags. The US camp was totally isolated because there is a tendency by US commanders to maximize security, which results in less interaction with the community. The military stays behind its walls. I went to the French base camp, we spent 24 hours there. The French troops were so much more comfortable in that environment. They were well equipped, with special nets to create shade. They were flying fresh fruits and vegetables. We had not had a meal like this for weeks. You could walk into the local town from the camp. The officers and soldiers mingled with the locals. There seemed to be much more interaction with the locals. “

Given the depth of these colonially-induced ties, there is indeed a high level of expectation worldwide that the Sahel ought to be France’s backyard and that, therefore, “France has the responsibility to intervene.”⁷⁰ As a French diplomat explains:

“The summary of the Sahelian vision with regards to France is: please leave, but not right now. We still regularly have candidates to elections in the Sahel who visit us in Paris to ask for an official endorsement. They somehow think that France is still the kingmaker in Africa. Even NGOs come to us and ask: ‘Why don’t you put this or that person in charge in such country,’ not realizing that we absolutely cannot do that. There are still huge expectations for France.”⁷¹

However, it would be wrong to assume that France is the innocent victim of high expectations. France indeed benefits immensely from the high level of proximity that it has nurtured with its former African colonies. In other words, “France does not only defend security interests in the Sahel, it is defending relations.”⁷² Indeed, its military involvement in the Sahel plays a crucial role in France’s ‘self-esteem’ as a major power and, as far as domestic politics is concerned, in president’s public perception as a capable commander-in-chief. As a scholar explains:

“France could have exfiltrated its nationals from Mali without a fully-fledged military operation like Serval! France wants to demonstrate that it still is a world power, so it has exaggerated the terrorist threat to boost its merit in intervening.”⁷³

France’s military engagement in the Sahel also played a role in boosting its presidents’ approval ratings and public portrayal as *chef des armées* [commander-in-chief]. Strikingly, when François Hollande visited the newly liberated Timbuktu on February, 2 2013 and was welcomed with crowds chanting “Vive la France, Vive Hollande!”⁷⁴, he confessed that “[he] had probably been living the

⁷⁰ Interview with an expert at a think tank, phone call, 2019.

⁷¹ Interview with French diplomat, Paris 2019.

⁷² Interview with an expert at a think tank, Washington, D.C., 2018.

⁷³ Interview with a scholar, phone call, 2019.

⁷⁴ Coleman, K. (2013, February 2). ‘Vive Francois Hollande!’ France’s President Visits Mali. *National Public Radio*.

most important day of [his] political life.”⁷⁵ Likewise, Emmanuel Macron’s first foreign trip—less than a week after his inauguration, was to visit French troops in Gao, Mali.⁷⁶

Troop engagement in the Sahel has provided France with “strategic credibility”⁷⁷ to justify its seat in the United Nations’ Security Council and its low level of contribution to NATO, by distinguishing itself from other middle powers that are not involved in combat operations. Thanks to its promotion efforts around the Serval and Barkhane operations, France has succeeded in establishing combat operations” as the matrix to evaluate a country’s actual involvement in world affairs.”⁷⁸ As a French senior officer accounts:

“I was in a meeting with Jean-Yves Le Drian [then French Minister of Defense] and Ashton Carter [his then American counterpart] and, at the end of the meeting, Carter was visibly embarrassed to mention one of his talking-points, which was a request that France funds one of NATO’s AWACS bases. Le Drian became furious and said ‘I am extremely irritated. Don’t let yourself be manipulated by these shit countries that are doing no combat operation whatsoever and that are asking you to get money from me. Let’s be serious, we’re among each other, what counts is combat operations. I don’t want to hear about this any longer.’”⁷⁹

Beyond the aforementioned political dividends, such a showcase of force has also allowed France to “remind the world of the high performance and rapid reaction capacity of the French forces.”⁸⁰ This has allowed France to establish itself as a leader in the growing market of ‘Military Operational Partnerships’ [the French army’s terminology for the training of partner militaries]. In this field, “France’s combat and counterterrorism experience has endowed it with a high level of credibility.”⁸¹ This operational *savoir-faire* provides opportunities to showcase French-made military equipment with the potential result of selling armament. In the context of the G5 Sahel’s forces’ \$500 million budget, the possible boost for boosting French arms exports would be significant.

The Serval and Barkhane operations appeared during a period of “militarization of French diplomacy in Africa,”⁸² which can be argued to be the result of an institutional divide between French international diplomacy—naturally led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)—and African

⁷⁵ Royer, de S. (2017, January 14). Hollande au Mali sur les traces du « jour le plus important » de sa vie politique. *Le Monde*.

⁷⁶ Guibert, N. (2017, May 19). Au Mali, Macron conforte les opérations antiterroristes au Sahel. *Le Monde*.

⁷⁷ Interview with French senior officer, phone call, 2019.

⁷⁸ Interview with French senior officer, Paris, 2019.

⁷⁹ Interview with French senior officer, Paris, 2019.

⁸⁰ Interview with French expert at a think tank, phone call, 2019.

⁸¹ Interview with French senior officer, Paris, 2019.

⁸² Interview with French scholar, Paris, 2019.

affairs affairs—on which the Ministry of Defense has traditionally had prominence.⁸³ This phenomenon was further reinforced by the heavy political weight of Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian in the Hollande administration. As a scholar argues:

“For the military, there is an economic reasoning behind military engagement in the Sahel the fight against the meltdown of military budgets in the last twenty years. For some generals, Barkhane is destined to be like Épervier [the codename for the French military presence in Chad that was supposed to be temporary when it started in 1986], it will last two-hundred years!”⁸⁴

French diplomacy, in the face of this lost battle for influence against the military—the MFA was not in favor of military intervention in Mali—has thereafter been accused of cultivating its marginalization. Then-foreign minister Laurent Fabius allowed the military to take over the Sahel dossier to concentrate his work on business diplomacy.⁸⁵ Prominent critiques of a solely military solutions to the crisis in the Sahel within the French MFA such as Laurent Bigot, Jean-Félix Paganon or Christian Rouyet—respectively head of the Mali desk, special envoy for the Sahel and Ambassador to Mali—were all removed just weeks after the start of the Serval operation.⁸⁶

The level of parliamentary control over military affairs in France is minimal compared to the United States or Germany because the French Constitution that gives the president the ultimate responsibility over foreign and defense policy as commander-in-chief (Art. 15). They are also the guarantor of national independence, territorial integrity and due respect for Treaties (Art. 5).⁸⁷ Furthermore, by contrast to the American public’s lack of support for and critical scrutinization of external operations,⁸⁸ the French public offers a much higher level of support to its army being engaged abroad, with a better degree of tolerance to the exposition of personnel.⁸⁹

One crucial positive externality that results from France’s engagement in the Sahel has been greatly consolidating its partnership with the United States. One aspect of it is the “relation of extreme trust”⁹⁰ that has developed over time. As a French senior officer accounts, “In Tongo Tongo, it took only forty-five minutes for French fighter jets to rush to the scene. This demonstrates that

⁸³ Merchet, J.-D. (2015, July 1). Jean-Yves Le Drian. Ministre de l’Afrique. *L’Opinion*.

⁸⁴ Interview with a French scholar, phone call, 2019.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Barluet, A. (2013, March 11). Le Mali fait tomber des têtes au Quai d’Orsay. *Le Figaro*; Interview with former French diplomat, Paris, 2019.

⁸⁷ République Française (1958). Constitution du 4 Octobre 1958.

⁸⁸ Interview with former senior policy-maker, Stanford, CA, 2018.

⁸⁹ Interview with French senior officer, Paris, 2019.

⁹⁰ Interview with French senior officer, Paris, 2019.

channels of communication are always open between the two parties. Everybody is calling each other by first name.”⁹¹ Therefore, another aspect of this improvement is that the United States has been impressed by France’s rapid reaction and simple chain of command capacities.⁹² As the same officer explained, “There were doubts on the U.S. side whether Hollande would be a fitting commander-in-chief. Mali has really reassured the Americans.”⁹³ As a French officer explained:

“It took us one night [10 to 11 January 2013] to go from ‘we won’t intervene’ to ‘let’s go’. The Americans were amazed by how quick our chains of command are. I remember a phone call on January 11 between Le Drian and [then U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon] Panetta where the former asked his counterpart for logistical support in moving the troops. The latter replied ‘of course, let us get back to you in a few days on this’ to which Le Drian responded ‘I don’t think you understand Leon, we’re *already* there and fighting has begun.’”⁹⁴

This privileged relationship and high level of trust has had a trickle-down effect, which has helped raise cooperation levels in many other areas: “It has been a gentlemen’s agreement between us and the Americans. We told them, ‘we take care of the Sahel and you compensate our gaps elsewhere.’”⁹⁵ No matter whether this was calculated by the French from the beginning or whether it is just the positive externality of a well-run operation, the strategic relationship in military affairs between France and the United States had never been better during the Obama presidency. While it seems exaggerated to go as far as to say that France is a client of the United States in the Sahel, the level of delegation on the part of the United States is on the rise. One French senior officer said, “my American counterparts have told me: if we give you x million, how many Jihadists can you kill?”⁹⁶

2.3. Impact for conditionality

To conclude, the U.S. strategic framework is clear: neither terrorism nor the Sahel are seen as high priorities. In the additional context of wanting to reduce its global troop footprint and to contain costs, the U.S. policy of partnership and capacity-building is a natural consequence. By contrast, while France shares the same partnership and ‘African solutions to African problems’ policy framework, the strategic context of its involvement in the Sahel is a lot different. Not only is

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Interview with French senior officer, phone call, 2019.

⁹³ Interview with French senior officer, Paris, 2019.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Interview with French senior officer, Paris, 2019.

⁹⁶ Interview with French senior officer, phone call, 2019.

terrorism a lot higher on France's priority list, but the Sahel also plays a much more important role both externally—its global strategy depends on appearing more war-ready than other middle powers, and domestically regarding the status of the armed forces and the role of the Sahel in France's national unconscious. Against this backdrop, counterterrorism in the Sahel is a lot more vital for France than it is for the United States.

It emanates from this discussion that, while the United States seems to advocate the policy of 'African solutions to African problems', one could go as far as arguing that France practices that of 'French solutions to African problems'. The consequence of this is a stark difference in dynamic with local actors. First, it is a lot more difficult for France to put forward a credible incentive structure to ensure its local partners' compliance if the latter know that the partnership is so crucial to France. Second, the level of historical and emotional ties that France entertain with its former colonies is a double-edged sword insofar as, while these ties nurture France's expertise and capacity to engage with local actors, they also give France a strong sense of responsibility that might hinder its ability to have an independent voice in the region.

Chapter 3: Capacities and constraints of the Sahelian partners

3.1. Common challenges

The capacity of local partners to make use of available resources from external partners is a crucial variable in assessing the effectiveness of counterterrorism security force assistance. In the Sahel, all of this thesis' case studies present significant difficulties, albeit to varying degrees.

Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad face numerous common challenges. The first one is the “tyranny of distance in the Sahel.”⁹⁷ Indeed, these four countries share a territory larger than Western Europe in size, with large areas of inhabited land. Not only is it therefore difficult for the army and law enforcement to install a visible presence across the entire territory, it also proves almost impossible to ensure rapid reaction capacities to terrorist insurgencies that take place in remote areas. This allows terrorist groups to establish safe havens in these areas of relative impunity, which they use to re-organize themselves after governmental operations. The insurgents that they are facing are making significant progress in equipment and tactics. They benefit from a steady flow of weapons and ammunition coming from the still-unresolved Libyan chaos. Their high level of decentralization is also a disadvantage for the states that are fighting them, as it makes it relatively ineffective to target commanders because replacements are quickly found: “When a terrorist commander is killed, the *katibas* recruit three new ones. Heads grow again.”⁹⁸

Furthermore, up to 80% of the armies' personnel is engaged in combat operations,⁹⁹ thus making it very difficult to dedicate time and effort to training purposes, which is the main focus of security force assistance in the Sahel. As a Sahelian senior officer puts it: “it is not easy to reconstruct an army while it is fighting a war, there is no breathing space.”¹⁰⁰ Armies themselves face numerous challenges such as the ineffectiveness—if not complete absence—of an aviation to ensure air supremacy, the logistical incapacity of moving, housing and feeding large numbers of troops in military front-posts and the lack of advanced medical evacuation and field-hospital capacities.¹⁰¹ The human resources challenge should be singled out, for it constitutes a further impediment to fully benefitting from training. Indeed, the lack of IT solutions makes it challenging for headquarters

⁹⁷ Interview with a European senior officer, phone call, 2019.

⁹⁸ Le Cam, M. (2019, May 4th). Au Mali, l'opération « Barkhane » ensablée en terre oubliée. Le Monde.

⁹⁹ Interview with French senior officer, Paris, 2019

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Sahelian senior officer, Washington, D.C., 2018

¹⁰¹ Interview with French senior officer, Paris, 2019

to monitor the careers of their troops and to ensure that each personnel receives adequate training and is deployed where they fit best. As a French officer explains:

“You train someone at a high level in infantry, he might thereafter end up in the army’s administration. The accountant might end up in active combat and the artilleryman in accounting. If these human resources issues were resolved, Sahelian armies would jump 100 places in the world ranking.”¹⁰²

Human resources also extend to pay management, where the lack of an electronic banking system still permits the practice of cash payment to camp commanders, thus favoring corruption and malpractices. Another key difficulty in making use of security force assistance is need assessment reports insofar as it proves challenging for commanders to create estimates of what material and training they actually need. A French officer provides the example of “the head of the Malian Gendarmerie’s vehicle park who did not actually know how many vehicles he had” or that of “an official request for riot police shields when the Gendarmerie’s warehouses were full of new and still unopened ones.”¹⁰³ Finally, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared during a recent visit to Burkina Faso, Sahelian countries “dedicate 15 to 20% of their budget to defense and security.”¹⁰⁴ Security is therefore already so expensive that it proves difficult to dedicate more funds to improving the security apparatus, let alone spending money on developmental work and on restoring state authority in insurgent areas.

3.2. Mali

As a Sahelian officer explains, “When the French arrived, the FAMA [*Forces Armées Maliennes*—Malian Armed Forces] were in a terrible state. It was a group of uniform-wearers rather than an army.”¹⁰⁵ Six years later, the Malian counterterrorism capabilities encompassing the FAMA and the country’s law enforcement units are still inadequate to deal with the armed insurgencies that have taken place in the north of the country since 2012. Indeed, as declared by a Western military attaché “Malian armed forces have no standard operating procedures, their deficiencies are horrendous, and the air force has no airplane in flying condition, in a territory that is the

¹⁰² Interview with French senior officer, Paris, 2019

¹⁰³ Interview with French senior officer, phone call, 2019.

¹⁰⁴ A Ouagadougou, Angela Merkel appelle à aider les pays du Sahel dans leur lutte contre le terrorisme. (2019, May 2). *Le Monde*

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Sahelian senior officer, Washington, D.C. 2018.

combined size of France and Spain.”¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, in its 2013 Country Report, the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism affirmed that “Although Mali has basic border security, law enforcement units lacked the capacity, training, and necessary equipment to secure Mali’s porous borders, which extend approximately 4,500 miles and touch seven countries.”¹⁰⁷ As a French officer explained, the FAMA suffer from a crucial lack of equipment:

“for a long time, four policemen had to share one Kalashnikov. As far as the army’s concerned, young recruit were sent to the North of Mali in cattle trucks with three chargers each [enough to last for about ten minutes during intense gunfire]. So what they did is that they emptied their three chargers and fled, leaving their heavier equipment and artillery to be seized by the Jihadists and be paraded in the streets of Kidal.”¹⁰⁸

The same officer points to a general problem of military culture, whereby “many soldiers enlisted just to have the uniform and the pay, with one officer telling me ‘I’m paid to turn up to the office, if they want me to work, they’ll have to pay extra.’”¹⁰⁹ This perhaps explains why French-led trainings were often perceived as a bonanza by many among both the rank-and-file and officer personnel, eager to escape the dangers of combat and happy to receive the *per diems* that came with the training:

“We found ourselves delivering trainings on judiciary police to cooks and mechanics. Or else, we had people who had just graduated from one of our trainings who came back the following Monday to do it all over again. [...] One Gendarmerie commander once told me: ‘I’m leaving Mali, I’ve just found myself a six-months language course in Canada. But the best was perhaps that artillery lieutenant who was sent to Germany for a two-months course on how to protect nuclear power stations. When I asked his colonel to explain me the rationale of it, since Mali does not have any nuclear power stations, he simply answered: ‘You never know.’”¹¹⁰

A United Nations official also explains, the added value of trainings does not seem to be realized:

“when I came to the ministry of defense to offer a training on International Humanitarian Law, I thought this would be a new field to most rank-and-file personnel, since the training was at the ministry’s request. I was extremely surprised when one of the officials told me that most personnel actually goes through four or five of these a year, it is more than in Western armies!”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Craven-Matthews & Englebert (2018). “A Potemkin State in the Sahel? The Empirical and the Fictional in Malian State Reconstruction,” *African Security*, 11:1, 131, DOI: [10.1080/19392206.2017.1419634](https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2017.1419634)

¹⁰⁷ Bureau of Counterterrorism (2017). Country Reports. U.S. Department of State.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with French senior officer, 2019.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Interview with French senior officer, 2019.

¹¹¹ Interview with a United Nations official, phone call, 2019

Despite all these deficiencies, the 2015 Malian *Loi d’Orientation et de Programmation Militaire* [LPOM—the Malian bill defining the state’s military planning] has allowed for both a real improvement in the aviation—which accrued from none to seven light aircraft—and in personnel figures—with about ten thousand recruits in the 2015-2019 period.

As far as the strength of state institutions is concerned, Mali finds itself again at the bottom end of the spectrum. The country is plagued by its weak, mostly primary sector economy, which relies on external assistance for subsistence—Mali receives three times more aid than the African national average.¹¹² Malians resent President Keïta’s inability to break their country’s paralysis—only about 30% of Malians have ‘real trust’ in him.¹¹³ Furthermore, the government controls only 20.5% of Mali’s territory—by contrast to 80% on average throughout Africa.¹¹⁴ This territorial deficiency has a significant impact on the Northern population’s trust in government. Indeed, in Gao—the Northern-most city that the polling institute was able to reach due to security reasons—the president’s approval ratings in the ‘real trust’ category was only 6.8%, against 37% in Bamako.¹¹⁵ Northern Malians resent what they perceive as a “lack of attention on the part of Bamako,”¹¹⁶ which “does not address the social and political issues of marginalization.” Strikingly, the Jihadist insurgents’ most targeted victims are often state representatives and civil servants, thus reinforcing the difficulty for the state to provide the very public services that would increase the level of trust within the general population. As a Malian civil servant explained:

“nobody has done anything [for our security], once again. ‘Barkhane’ secures its own camp, the FAMA secures theirs. But the state representatives are left on their own. We thought that the arrival of the French was going to make the bandits flee, but nothing has changed. We are even more exposed than we were last year.”¹¹⁷

Finally, violence in Mali has taken an inter-confessional and inter-ethnic turn which could lead to a ‘balkanisation’ of the territory if it remains uncontrolled by Bamako. Indeed, as the Jihadist insurgency was ousted from northern Mali and gradually moved to the center of the country, it exacerbated historically-high social conflicts: “the environment is dominated by local power struggles as well as a cycle of reprisals and vengeance between actors that face each other for the

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Fahlbusch, J. H., (2014). Enquête d’opinion « Que pensent les Maliens ? ». *FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG*, BAMAKO.

¹¹⁴ Craven-Matthews & Englebert. “A Potemkin State in the Sahel?”

¹¹⁵ Fahlbusch, J. H., (2014). Enquête d’opinion « Que pensent les Maliens ? ». *FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG*, BAMAKO.

¹¹⁶ Interview with former Central Intelligence Agency senior official, Washington, D.C., October 2018.

¹¹⁷ Le Cam, M. Au Mali, l’opération « Barkhane » ensablée en terre oubliée. *Le Monde*.

area's very limited resources."¹¹⁸ Most recently, on March 23rd 2019, at least 160 Peuls were killed by a Dogon self-defense militia, in reprisal to wide-spread rumors that these villagers were sympathizers of the Katiba Macina, and on June 9th, 160 Dogons were murdered by unidentified Peul perpetrators, all in central Mali¹¹⁹. Kalyvas argues that violent actions on the ground often turn out to be related to local and private conflicts, rather than to national or international issues, or at least result in the convergence of local motives and supra-local imperatives.¹²⁰ This theory is key to understand how local and global narratives are intertwined in the central and norther Malians conflict. Therefore, Mali's political and military situation shows extreme structural difficulties and challenges in making use of the assistance made available by external partners.

3.3. Niger

Niger's security forces are some of the weakest in Africa, plagued by a lack of training and equipment.¹²¹ The country, ranked last in the United Nations' Human Development Index, faces significant socio-economic and environmental challenges due to its rising population—it has the world's highest fertility rate and population growth at respectively 7,6 children per woman and 4%-and it is a landlocked agrarian economy. However, unlike neighboring Mali, Niger can count on the response of its institutions to this crisis. First, the country's constitutional order is resilient, having survived several internal crises such as when former president Tandja's attempted to remain in power: after ousting him, the army kept its promise of handing power back to civilians.¹²² Secondly, current president Mahamadou Issoufou has "democratic credentials"¹²³ and high approval ratings, having been "re-elected with 92.5 percent of the vote in the second round"¹²⁴ of the last presidential elections. Furthermore, in Niger, Tuareg are spread homogeneously throughout the territory.¹²⁵ In contrast to Mali where the Tuareg Northern concentrations raised the cost of their inclusion into

¹¹⁸ Bensimon, C. (2019, March 27). Au Mali, « l'ampleur du massacre des Peuls est inédite, mais elle était prévisible ». *Le Monde*.

¹¹⁹ Le Cam, M. (2019, June 10). « Ils ont brûlé vif les habitants dans leurs maisons » : massacre d'un village dogon au centre du Mali. *Le Monde*

¹²⁰ Kalyvas, S. (2006). *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹²¹ Bureau of Counterterrorism (2017). *Country Reports*. U.S. Department of State.

¹²² Sheperd, B. & Melly, P. (2016, April). *Stability and Vulnerability in the Sahel: The Regional Roles and Internal Dynamics of Chad and Niger*. *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center*.

¹²³ Thurston, A. (2017, Sep. 12). Niger's Issoufou Is Everything the West Wants in an African Leader. *World Politics Review*.

¹²⁴ *ibid*.

¹²⁵ IRIN (2013, April, 11). Can Niger offer Mali lessons on the Tuareg?

government, President Issoufou has embarked on a policy of national integration and “appointed members of the Tuareg community, such as politician Brigi Rafini, to key government positions.”¹²⁶ The fact that Rafini, born in a Tuareg community in Iferouane, studied at France’s elite higher civil service school *École Nationale d’Administration*,¹²⁷ can be interpreted as evidence of Niger’s better results at Tuareg integration.

3.4. Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso, formerly a peaceful country which was recently described by the U.S. Department of State as a “strong U.S. security and defense partner” that “aggressively undertook measures to combat the regional danger posed by terrorist organizations”¹²⁸ by forming a new counterterrorism unit and doubling its intake of new recruits for the police force, has seen its security situation rapidly deteriorate in recent years. Jihadist armed violence has boomed, with more than 350 incidents that have caused the death of around 300 people since 2015. This terrorist outbreak is the result of the Serval and Barkhane operations in Mali that caused armed insurgents to flee from northern to central Mali, thus coming in proximity to the border with Northern Burkina Faso. Ansarul Islam thus became the first homegrown jihadist armed organization in Burkina Faso’s history. It is active in both central Mali and northern Burkina Faso, although it is rapidly progressing southwards. It was founded in 2016 by Ibrahim Malam Dicko, a preacher from Djibo, Burkina Faso (Soum Province), who radicalized after a trip to Mali. After Dicko’s death in June 2017, reportedly from natural causes, his brother, Jaffar Dicko, assumed the leadership of the organization. Ansarul Islam was declared a terrorist organization by the U.S. Department of State in February 2017. Its first major attack happened on December 16, 2016, when a Burkinabè border station was attacked, killing twelve soldiers.¹²⁹ At the time of Ansarul Islam’s inception, Ibrahim Malam Dicko had strong links to Ansar Dine’s Katibat Macina’s founder, Amadou Koufa.¹³⁰ Although relations between the two men gradually worsened, Ansarul Islam is still thought to be supported financially and operationally by Macina as well as its mother organization, Iyad Ag Ghali’s JNIM¹³¹. Recently, it has

¹²⁶ *ibid.*

¹²⁷ Niger: Brigi Rafini, un Touareg énarque à la tête du gouvernement (2011, April 14). *Jeune Afrique*.

¹²⁸ Bureau of Counterterrorism (2017). Country Reports. U.S. Department of State.

¹²⁹ Le Cam, M. (2017, April 11). Comment est né Ansaroul Islam, premier groupe djihadiste de l’Histoire du Burkina Faso. *Le Monde*.

¹³⁰ Weiss, C. (2018, June 24). Burkina Faso wanted list details Ansaroul Islam network. *FDD’s Long War Journal*.

¹³¹ *ibid.*

also been argued by military sources that Ansarul Islam was attempting to come closer to the Islamic State, through its daughter-organization, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

Analysts have also linked the volatility of Burkina Faso's security situation to the restructuring of Burkina Faso's security sector, following the downfall of Blaise Compaoré's regime, in October 2014, and the failed coup d'état of September 2014, which put an end to the country's ability to prevent armed dissent. Indeed, Burkina Faso's former president, Blaise Compaoré, "always volunteered to serve as an intermediary in hostage takings"¹³² and transformed his country into a neutral sanctuary that was thus unlikely to be the victim of attacks.¹³³ Therefore, Burkina Faso's first terrorist attacks happened after Compaoré's downfall, under the newly established democracy currently governed by Roch Marc Christian Kaboré.¹³⁴ With the dissolution of Compaoré's *Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle* (RSP)—the president's 'pretorian guard'—following an attempted coup in 2015 by some RSP officers, Burkina Faso has lost a sizable part of its elite forces.

However, despite the relative vulnerability inherent in a democratic transition, Burkina Faso maintains significant assets in the face of the terrorist threat. Not only is its territory smaller than its sub-regional counterparts—and thus more easy for its security forces to control—but also "Burkina Faso has a strong civil society, a modern and rather vigorous political class, and a strong traditional sector"¹³⁵ and "the predominant form of practice of Sunni Islam [in Burkina Faso] is not conducive to violent extremism."¹³⁶ It is nonetheless noteworthy that radicalization in Burkina Faso is starting to feed on the longtime socioeconomic and institutional disparity between the South and the North—where civil servants are often seen by the local population as "enriching themselves rather than providing services."¹³⁷ Indeed, Malam Ibrahim Dicko declared his aim of "reconquering and rebuilding the ancient Peul kingdom of Djeelgodji that collapsed because of French colonization during the late 19th century."¹³⁸ This, in addition to the fact that "the local Fulani population, much like across the Sahel, appears to have borne the brunt of this state-sanctioned violence,"¹³⁹ seems

¹³² Interview with Department of State senior official, Washington, D.C., October 2018; Nsaibia, H. & Weiss, C. (2018, March). Ansarul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso. *CTC Sentinel*.

¹³⁴ Nsaibia, H. & Weiss, C. (2018, March). Ansarul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso. *CTC Sentinel*.

¹³⁵ Nickels, B. (2016, Jan 25). Terrorists Strike Burkina Faso: What are the Implications? *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*.

¹³⁶ Bureau of Counterterrorism (2017). Country Reports. U.S. Department of State.

¹³⁷ International Crisis Group (2017). Nord du Burkina Faso : ce que cache le jihad.

¹³⁸ Buchanan, E. (2017, January 4). Radical Muslim preacher Malam Ibrahim Dicko wants to rebuild the Peulh kingdom in Burkina Faso. *International Business Times*.

¹³⁹ Nsaibia, H. & Weiss, C. (2018, March). Ansarul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso. *CTC Sentinel*.

to indicate that Northern and Eastern Burkina Faso could soon follow the trend of national dislocation that central Mali is falling victim to, albeit to a lesser degree. Indeed, on January 1st 2019, an unconfirmed 210 Peuls were killed by Mossi self-defense militias and in the immediate aftermath of the massacre of 160 Peuls in Mali, eight people—including three Peuls—have died in interethnic clashes near the border with Mali.

3.5. Chad

Chad benefits from having one of the largest and best equipped armies in Central Africa. Chad has a sizeable contingent of 15,000 U.S. and French trained elite troops—from the *Direction Générale de la Sécurité des Institutions de l'État* (DGSSIE).¹⁴⁰ In addition, the size of the *Armée Nationale Tchadienne* (ANT) has increased significantly from 17,000 soldiers in 1989-1990 to 23,250 in 2013.¹⁴¹ Its budget grew by a factor of 7.9 between 2004 and 2008, when it was the third-largest arms importer in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁴² Its weaponry has also greatly improved in recent years. Chad has gained air supremacy in the Sahel through buying Italian-made strategic transport aircrafts (C-27 J Spartan), as well as Russian combat helicopters (Mi-24, Mi-8) and fighter jets (Su-25 Frogfoot and Mig 29 Fulcrum) which are however piloted by foreign—mostly Ukrainian—mercenaries. Chad's army also has extensive combat experience, having been deployed countless times in the sub-region—2000 troops supporting Laurent-Désiré Kabila in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 1998, a peacekeeping contingent in the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2014 and most recently sending 2000 DGSSIE troopers to support the French operation in northern Mali.

Beyond the military aspect the reason why Chad is described by observers as a “beacon of stability in a turbulent region”¹⁴³ amounts to one essential factor: the Déby's regime's iron fist on protest and radicalization. Déby has been in power since 1990 and has faced no face serious opposition in the past decade. Any dissent is met with “harassment, arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment and torture of journalists, civil society activists and political opponents.”¹⁴⁴ Indeed, “Chad's government is itself a product of a civil war and remains military at heart;”¹⁴⁵ it is “a security regime

¹⁴⁰ Thurston, A. (2017, October 18). America Should Beware a Chadian Military Scorned. *Foreign Policy*.

¹⁴¹ Lecoutre, Delphine, e Agnès Stienne. « Le Tchad, puissance de circonstance. » *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 2016:

¹⁴² Debos, M. (2016, June). Behind the cliché of the Chadian 'desert warriors', militarized politics and Idriss Déby's global political capital. *World Peace Foundation*.

¹⁴³ Sheperd, B. & Melly, P. (2016, April). Stability and Vulnerability in the Sahel: The Regional Roles and Internal Dynamics of Chad and Niger. *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center*.

¹⁴⁴ Moncrieff, Richard. In Backing Chad, the West Faces Moral Hazards. *International Crisis Group*, 2017.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

with a family and clanic base”¹⁴⁶ The main provider of regime security in Chad, the defender of Déby’s regime, is an ‘army within the army.’ The troops from the DGSSIE as well as the *Garde Nationale et Nomade* (GNN) are all made of Zaghawa soldiers, Déby’s own ethnic community. The commander of the DGSSIE is one of Déby’s sons, the GNN is headed by Déby’s own uncle, and the troops tasked with defending the Sudan-Chad border and the expeditionary corps in the CAR are led by Déby’s nephew and cousin. It is worth noting that Chad’s elite forces benefit from a very good reputation among Western military staffs. As a French officer explained,

“Chadians are courageous and there is a huge amount of social pressure to be brave during combat. Therefore, they don’t even hide during gunfire as this would be considered cowardice. The problem, then, is that a lot of officers die on duty so there’s a severe penury of high-ranking staff: few make it to that age [...] Déby himself is famous for his courage: during a ceremony in N’Djamena, a bomb exploded while he was delivering a speech. Everybody ran away, and the only one who remained phlegmatic was Déby himself. [...] The Chadian president is also renowned for his ruthlessness. His most renowned feat happened during a battle in an *oued* between troops loyal to him and rebels. The fighting was so fierce that friends and foes could not be distinguished from one another. Déby jumped on a pick-up with his clan, rushed to the scene and killed every single one of them, loyalists and rebels alike. The result of this warrior-behavior is that Chadians are feared all over the Sahel”¹⁴⁷

Indeed, while Chadians might be good at war, they are not as skilled winning peace. As a scholar explains: “A good warrior does not make a good soldier. While Chadians have outstanding strike capacities, the same is not true for their ability to stabilize and gain civilian trust.”¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, despite the strength of its security apparatus, Chad is still 186th out of 189 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index and suffers from a number of internal challenges.

First, Chad’s state finances have always been fragile, and they are increasingly more so now due to the regime’s high defense spending, which drains the government’s budget. Chad also has debts to Glencore due to the private refinancing of its public debt after the collapse of the oil prices in 2014-2015, which means that all the proceeds from oil sales now go towards the firm by virtue of a contract.¹⁴⁹ Chad stopped paying civil servants’ wages—even those of the DGSSIE troops—for months in 2016. Second, Déby’s clanic base, the Zaghawa, represent 2% of the population but secure “a vastly disproportionate number of senior positions in the government, parastatals and

¹⁴⁶ Luntumbue, M. & Massock, S. (2014, February 27). AFRIQUE CENTRALE : RISQUES ET ENVERS DE LA PAX TCHADIANA. GRIP.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with a French senior officer, Paris, 2019

¹⁴⁸ Interview with a scholar, phone call, 2019.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with a scholar, phone call, 2019.

the military,”¹⁵⁰ thus fueling resentment. Chabal, Daloz & Terray analyze the rationality behind the politics of informality in Africa.¹⁵¹ They argue that African polities entertain two sources of political legitimacy at the same time: the first is through ‘sham’ elections and constitutional order and the other, which is built on neo-patrimonial patron-client relations, is ‘the reality.’ This theory proves important in understanding the domination of Idriss Déby’s ethnic group over Chad’s political and military power.

Third, Chad has a “two-class army.”¹⁵² Déby’s ‘pretorian guard’, the DGSSIE, receives most of the funding and gets substantially better paid, while the *Armée Nationale Tchadienne* “suffers from numerous deficiencies.”¹⁵³ Furthermore, because every DGSSIE officer forms their own units, often from their village, the armed forces are hardly institutionalized. For the time being, these challenges are overshadowed by Déby’s strong grip on the country. However, in the absence of democratic institutions, Chad’s long-term ability to tackle terrorist threats—especially in the post-Déby transition—seems weaker than Niger’s or Burkina Faso’s.

3.6. Regional cooperation

Finally, as far as regional cooperation is concerned, the *Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel* (FC-G5S—the military partnership between the five member of the G5 Sahel) is a recipient of much of the security force assistance in the sub-region. It is also a structure that France has put high hopes on and invested many resources in,¹⁵⁴ in case the MINUSMA’s mandate will not be renewed for another year because of the U.S.’ renowned opposition to peacekeeping operations. While the structure is promising—with about 4,000 personnel deployed in the highly strategic Liptako-Gourma region, which sits at the crossroads between Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali—it still suffers from significant deficiencies that make it more of an empty shell. On June 28, 2018, its headquarters in Sévaré, Mali, were destroyed by a terrorist attacks, which stopped all of its counterterror operations. Following the incident, the entire military staff of the joint force was removed from office, and the headquarters were moved to Bamako, far from the frontline. Ironically, by November

¹⁵⁰ Sheperd, B. & Melly, P. (2016, April). Stability and Vulnerability in the Sahel: The Regional Roles and Internal Dynamics of Chad and Niger. *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center*

¹⁵¹ Chabal, P. & Daloz, J.-P. (1999). *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. Melton: James Currey Publishers; Terray, E. (1987). *L'État contemporain en Afrique*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

¹⁵² Debos, M. (2016, June). Behind the cliché of the Chadian ‘desert warriors’, militarized politics and Idriss Déby’s global political capital. *World Peace Foundation*.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Sahelian former senior policy maker, phone call, 2019.

2018, the force's new commanding staff had not been provided with any office space by the Malian authorities,¹⁵⁵ thus revealing both its structural difficulties and the lack of will of the sub-region's head of state to invest in their newly established joint military instrument. Indeed, the FC-G5S is also undermined by the lack of interstate trust that plagues the sub-region, which is "still disturbed by the past."¹⁵⁶ all of the actors are highly weary of seeing each other's militaries on their own territory. Another challenge faced by the FC-G5S is in obtaining the funding that the international community promised to deliver. In November 2018, out of a promised €415 million, only half was paid out. The joint force's stalemate seems to be locked in a stalemate between Sahelian governments and major donors. As one scholar explained, "The G5 says: 'give us the money and we'll do the job' and the donors respond: 'we'll wait until you start delivering on operations.'"¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Bourreau, M. (2018, November 16). L'ONU s'inquiète du manque de moyens de la force du G5 Sahel. *Le Monde*.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with a scholar, phone call, 2019.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with a scholar, phone call, 2019.

Chapter 4: Willingness and interest alignment of the Sahelian partners

I now turn to discussing the local partner's willingness to comply with the agenda that guides the security force assistance program, which is to engage in meaningful structural reforms to be able to independently face the terrorist threat. Willingness is a factor of the interest alignment between the local partner and the major power.

4.1. Mali

Mali has misaligned interests with the West: it "has little interest in resolving the problem and uses international engagement to not address the problem."¹⁵⁸ First, the cost of compliance with the Western agenda of long-term stabilization is unbearable for a political elite which, as explained above, is not willing to include Tuaregs into the political process. Mali's social contract is in such a deep crisis that it proves impossible for Bamako's political elite to offer any political solution to the crisis. Mamdani argues that decolonization brought about the successful de-racialization of the core of the postcolonial polity, that is to say that white elites were replaced by local, black elites.¹⁵⁹ However, peripheries—which had been mostly left to traditional authorities because of the 'divide to rule' strategy of colonial powers—did not get de-tribalized during decolonization. This led to a binary functioning of the State—which Mamdani calls the 'citizen-subject divide'. This expression eloquently explains Mali's divide between Bamako's black elite and its refusal to share power with northern ethnic groups such as Tuaregs. Mali, which is itself the artificial product of colonial territorial design, can thus be argued to be reflected in Hobsbawm & Ranger's theory that colonial modernity invented African postcolonial tradition.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, the Malian government has been historically reluctant to recognize the threat posed by armed Jihad in its Northern territories. As a former French diplomat explains:

"Originally, in the early 2000s, there were only a few dozens of Jihadists in Northern Mali, mostly of Algerian origin. Malian authorities were absolutely not interested in them, they considered that this was an Algerian problem. When they started performing more sophisticated hostage takings, France started to push Bamako to become interested in the terrorist threat. However, Malian authorities kept repeating that it was only a matter of

¹⁵⁸ Interview with former U.S. senior official, Washington, D.C., 2018.

¹⁵⁹ Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen and Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press .

¹⁶⁰ Hobsbawm, E. & Ranger, T. (2012). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

organized crime and that it was an Algerian problem. According to Bamako, it was better to be a Jihadist than a Tuareg irredentist”¹⁶¹

Therefore, while external pressure has succeeded in changing Bamako’s rhetoric and public concern with the terrorist threat, Bamako is still “obsessed on not surrendering anything to the Tuaregs.”¹⁶²

Second, and most importantly, Mali has little incentive to engage in meaningful counterterrorism because “reconstruction and its international apparatus largely exonerate the Malian government from the consequences of its weaknesses.”¹⁶³ On a security level, Mali is dependent on the UN-run MINUSMA and on the French-led Barkhane operations, with combined troop levels of around 15,000.¹⁶⁴ On a budgetary level, between 20 and 25% of Mali’s GDP comes from foreign capital influx, half of which covers the cost of the aforementioned operations.¹⁶⁵

The distrust of the Malian population towards the Barkhane operation has increased steadily, from 90% in 2013 to just above 30% in 2018.¹⁶⁶ It comes with a general trend of a worsening relationship with France: Malians are quite suspicious of France, especially regarding “[their accusations of] France having sent troops to Mali to exploit Northern Mali’s natural resources.”¹⁶⁷ Objectively, Mali actually has very few natural resources and scholars—even those critical of the French intervention—are almost unanimous in their disbelief of France’s alleged economic exploitation of northern Mali. What is even more preoccupying is that these concerns are shared at the highest levels. As a French diplomat recalled, “a Malian politician recently asked me ‘are you really sure that there’s no gold in Northern Mali?’”¹⁶⁸ and this conspiracy theory was shared by a Sahelian officer who declared “Everything that goes on in Mali is piloted by France because we have invisible resources that only they can exploit.”¹⁶⁹ This lack of trust among the general population and some elites further decreases the Malian government’s incentives to appear as a strong ally of the West. Furthermore, Southern Malian politicians resent France forcing them to sign the Algiers agreement with the Tuareg nobility to obtain some control of northern Mali, when Tuaregs only

¹⁶¹ Interview with former French diplomat, Paris, 2019.

¹⁶² Interview with former French diplomat, Paris, 2019.

¹⁶³ In Craven-Matthews & Englebert (2018). “A Potemkin State in the Sahel? The Empirical and the Fictional in Malian State Reconstruction,” *African Security*, 11:1, 131.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Sidiki, G. (undated) SONDAGE DE NOTATION, PAR LA POPULATION, DU PRESIDENT IBK ET DES DIFFERENTS ACTEURS AU MALI. *GISSE*.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Sahelian senior officer, Washington, D.C., 2018

¹⁶⁸ Interview with French diplomat, Paris, 2019

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Sahelian senior officer, Washington, D.C. 2018

make up to 3,5% of Mali's population.¹⁷⁰ Bamako's elite believe that the French are being manipulated by the Tuareg so that they can make undeserved gains, such as taking full control of Kidal. Indeed, the French forbade the FAMA to enter the city in 2013.

To this lack of interest alignment with the West, one should add that Mali suffers from a low level of global political capital. Indeed, Mali's political instability has led France, the United States and the European Union to stop all FAMA training, lest military equipment land in the wrong hands, be it in those of terrorists¹⁷¹ or of dissident officers, such as Capt. Sanogo, who toppled Amadou Toumani Touré in 2012 while wearing a U.S. Marine Corps badge on his uniform, which was testimony to his training in the United States.¹⁷² In the words of one Sahel researcher, "the U.S. does not work in Mali. It works through neighbors to work in Mali."¹⁷³ As a result, it can be argued that Mali's lack of interest alignment with its donors coupled with its low global political capital has created a vicious cycle that makes Mali more and more dependent on foreign direct action and unwilling to take its stabilization into its own hands.

4.2. Chad

Chad has a significant interest alignment with its Western partners and strongly benefits from this. Since taking power in 1990, Déby has transformed a former weakness—his country's war-ridden geopolitical context—into a strategic advantage by arguing that his country is the "the last defense to avoid regional chaos."¹⁷⁴ Déby has effectively turned Chad into a strategic actor in the global war on terror so has become a 'darling' of Western securitization. In other words, Chad wants to show its Western partners that it is fluent in the language of security. For instance, Chad takes part in the Trans-Sahel Counter Terrorism Initiative and hosted the Flintlock 2015 military exercise, which U.S. Special Forces organize every year. It is also a founding member of the FC-G5S. Echoing the Western antiterrorist legislative process, Chad adopted an 'anti-terror law' in 2017¹⁷⁵ that brought preliminary detention to 15 days (from 48 hours) However, the limits to Déby's interest alignment with the West is that "he turned the Western sponsored effort for state security into a

¹⁷⁰ Interview with former French diplomat, Paris, 2019

¹⁷¹ Polgreen, L. (2013, Jan 24) Mali Army, Riding U.S. Hopes, Is Proving No Match for Militants. *The New York Times*.

¹⁷² Interview with U.S. diplomat, Washington, D.C., 2018.

¹⁷³ Interview with a Sahel scholar, Washington, D.C., 2018.

¹⁷⁴ Caramel, Laurence. (2017, September 8). Tchad : Idriss Déby touche les dividendes de son engagement contre le terrorisme. *Le Monde*

¹⁷⁵ Tchad: une loi antiterroriste controversée. (2015). *Le Figaro*.

personal quest for regime security.”¹⁷⁶ As explained above, Chad’s resilience against terrorism-induced instability is anything but guaranteed in the longer term, due to a lack of constitutional institutions.

Most recently, Déby was able to trade off military involvement for financial support and global political capital because Chad’s active participation in counterterrorism operations in neighboring countries is fundamental to France. Indeed, Chad’s troops deployment was instrumental in the success of the Serval operation or, in more simple words. In other words, “without Chadian troops, there could have been no French mission in Mali.”¹⁷⁷ Chadian troops organized their own fuel and logistics to drive over 3,000 kilometers in the Sahara to fight alongside the French in Northern Mali “from day one.”¹⁷⁸ They now even host the headquarters of the Barkhane operation. As a French senior policy-maker at the time of the events explained, “every time Chad offered its help, there was immediately a financial discussion.”¹⁷⁹ Yet, “even as Chad’s economy took a nosedive in the context of corruption and authoritarianism, Déby’s international position appears untouchable.”¹⁸⁰ One reason for this is historical, if not sentimental. Indeed, Chad’s prime position in the hearts of French military leaders is linked to history because France’s colonial armies always has a fascination for those who mastered desert warfare. Chadians also played an important part in the liberation of France during World War Two. Some scholars even speak of a ‘pro-Chad lobby’ within the French armed forces.¹⁸¹

Chad’s regime benefits significantly from its strong interest alignment with the West. Western efforts to build state security are diverted towards the securitization of the regime, and Déby is unlikely to fall victim to sanctions because of his high level of global political capital and strategic leverage. Thus, not only is the ability of Western powers to drive the relationship with Déby doubtful, but the catastrophic scenario of a post-Déby collapse of the Chadian state seems more and more likely and inevitable. However, in the context of such instrumentalization, it is important not to exaggerate Chad’s power. The most recent example of this exaggeration trend¹⁸² happened when the Trump presidency decided to include Chad in its so-called ‘travel ban’ list, in October 2017. Within a few days, Chad pulled out hundreds of its troops from their duties in fighting

¹⁷⁶ Mirolo, M. (2017). FROM STATE SECURITY TO REGIME SECURITY. Exploring the relationship between the securitization of development and regime security through the case study of counter-terrorism in Chad. *Unpublished*

¹⁷⁷ Interview with former U.S. policy-maker, Stanford, CA, 2018.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with former French senior officer, phone call, 2019

¹⁷⁹ Interview with former French senior policy-maker, Paris, 2019.

¹⁸¹ Interview with a French scholar, phone call, 2019.

¹⁸² Mirolo, M. (2017). FROM STATE SECURITY TO REGIME SECURITY. Exploring the relationship between the securitization of development and regime security through the case study of counter-terrorism in Chad. *Unpublished*.

Boko Haram affiliated insurgents in neighboring Niger, thus leading to a deterioration of the situation on the ground.¹⁸³ Journalists immediately interpreted the latter even as a Chadian reaction and the fact that Chad was thereafter removed from the travel ban list, as a proof of Chad's strong leverage.¹⁸⁴ Subsequent journalistic investigations revealed that the removal of troops from Niger had actually been a reaction to a rising rebellion in the North of Chad and not to the U.S. inclusion of Chad in its 'travel ban' list.

4.3. Burkina Faso and Niger

Burkina Faso and Niger's interest alignment with their Western patrons seems ambiguous. Indeed, as one French diplomat explained, "Burkina Faso and Niger's issue is not to increase the visibility of foreign states like France, while accepting sufficient support to ensure international credibility."¹⁸⁵ Therefore, both countries have made the most of security force assistance by embarking in significant capacity building, while remaining weary of maintaining a tight grip on their sovereignty.

Burkina Faso embarked on a successful transition towards democracy in the post-Compaoré period as the country democratically elected Roch Marc Christian Kaboré in November 2015. The new regime also reformed the security sector by abolishing the RSP, Compaoré's 'pretorian guard', similar to Chad's DGSSIE.¹⁸⁶ Under the new regime, the double play that marked Compaoré's foreign policy came to an end. Simultaneously with this diplomatic change—and, as argued earlier, probably not by coincidence—the terrorist threat from Burkina Faso's northern border with Mali has increased exponentially. As such, with a democratically elected leader, institutions now in part free from the clan system that characterized the previous regime, and rising security concerns in the north, Burkina Faso's interests are a lot more focused on the external threat and so align more clearly with the West. However, Western policy-makers still lament Ouagadougou's lack of recognition that the terrorist threat is serious. As one journalist explained:

"even in the corridors of Kaboré's presidency, officials are trying to claim [that the degradation of the security situation in the North and the East of the country is due to] trans-

¹⁸³ Chad Pulls Troops From Fight Against Boko Haram in Niger. (2017, October 12). *Reuters*; Thurston, A. (2017, October 18). America Should Beware a Chadian Military Scorned. *Foreign Policy*.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Interview with French diplomat, Paris, 2019

¹⁸⁶ Nord du Burkina Faso : ce que cache le jihad. (2017). *International Crisis Group*.

border criminality as well as the activity of former members of the RSP trying to destabilize the regime.”¹⁸⁷

Burkina Faso’s free press and very dynamic civil society means that Kaboré also faces significant internal critiques. Indeed, Burkinabès’ satisfaction with the management of the security situation has steadily decreased, from an already low 54% in June 2017 to 31% one year later.¹⁸⁸ Additionally, the level of weariness with regards to France remains high among the general population.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, the question of sovereignty is an especially sensible one in Burkina Faso, one of the only states in the sub-region with historically significant borders because the country restored the ancient borders of the Mossi kingdom at independence in 1960. The result is that Burkina Faso has a “very sovereigntist posture and discourse,”¹⁹⁰ which hinders cooperation insofar as the country refuses to let its foreign partners review its defense spending.¹⁹¹ Therefore, President Kaboré is also facing rising internal pressure that might undermine the country’s long-term interest alignment with its Western partners.

Niger shares with Burkina Faso some of the same ambiguities regarding foreign security force assistance. On the one hand, President Issoufou is in need of the developmental aid that comes in exchange for his country’s compliance with Western demands. Beyond the need to fight against the country’s growing terrorist threat, Niger’s leverage comes from two areas where its compliance is highly strategic to its patrons. The first concerns immigration because until 2015, “Niger was the main transit country for sub-Saharan migrants travelling towards Europe”¹⁹² with over 100,000 yearly migrants in the sole city of Agadez, which is the last stop before crossing the Sahara and reaching the shores of the Mediterranean. Niger succeeded in cutting this figure by five, by agreeing to “the establishment of registration and screening centers within its territory, with the aim of separating refugees from ‘illegal’ migrants before anyone reaches Europe.”¹⁹³ The second area of strategic concern comes from Niger’s ideal position as a base for drone ISR and armed operations. The U.S. currently uses Niamey airport to deploy its drones across the Sahel and is

¹⁸⁷ Châtelot, C. (2018, October, 28). Le Burkina Faso, nouveau maillon faible dans la lutte antidjihadiste. *Le Monde*.

¹⁸⁸ Diakonia. (2018). *Le Présimètre*.

¹⁸⁹ Nord du Burkina Faso : ce que cache le jihad. (2017). *International Crisis Group*.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with French diplomat, Paris, 2019

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Châtelot, C. (2018, June 28). Le Niger, sous-traitant africain de la politique migratoire de l’Europe. *Le Monde*.

¹⁹³ Thurston, A. (2017, Sep. 12). *Niger’s Issoufou Is Everything the West Wants in an African Leader. World Politics Review*.

constructing another base in Agadez.¹⁹⁴ On the other hand, being a democratic elected leader, Issoufou's prime concern remains re-election and therefore his popularity. On this note, it is important to mention that Nigeriens are increasingly resentful of what they perceive as "an attack on [their] sovereignty."¹⁹⁵ Issoufou bore this in mind by negotiating an *arrangement* with the U.S. government to make the Agadez drone base officially a Nigerien Air Force base in order to respect the constitutional prohibition of foreign troops on its soil.¹⁹⁶ However, reducing the migration of Nigeriens towards Europe is—somehow counter-intuitively—not in the country's best economic interest as this would reduce the remittances of Nigeriens abroad which the country's balance of payments substantially depends on.¹⁹⁷ Therefore, Issoufou's external and internal interests do not perfectly match, thus rendering Niger's interest alignment with its Western partners unpredictable, at best.

4.4. Common tension points

However, it is important to mention that two structural factors in security force assistance already diminish its ability to bring about meaningful reform, beyond apparent interest alignment. First, substantial foreign aid creates dependency and does not encourage self-sufficiency. Indeed, as a former French diplomat explained, "until they remain under the French umbrella, Sahelian countries will not have any incentive to engage in political background work."¹⁹⁸ As a United Nations senior official confirmed, "when I meet presidents and prime ministers, they only ask me for money and equipment. They do not subscribe to our more global, developmental vision."¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, especially in a dossier that is of such vital importance to France that conditionality does not benefit from enough credibility, as explained in the second chapter, Sahelian states might actually have the opposite incentive to "entertain a pessimistic discourse"²⁰⁰ and "to remain weak in order to continue receiving external aid."²⁰¹ This incentive is hard to counteract in a context of information asymmetry between the local partner and the external major power. It is also reinforced by the fact

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Interview with a Nigerien senior commanding officer, Washington, D.C., October 2018.

¹⁹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ Funk, M. et al. (2017). Tackling irregular migration through development – a flawed approach? *European Policy Center*.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with former French diplomat, Paris, 2019

¹⁹⁹ Interview with United Nations senior official, Bratislava, Slovakia, 2019

²⁰⁰ Interview with French senior officer, phone call, 2019

²⁰¹ Interview with scholar, phone call, 2019

that “Sahelian countries master the security discourse by heart,”²⁰² and have a strong ability to leverage their strategic asset—being at the center of an important war for the West—for support. As a French officer puts it, “at least, what makes it easy is that everyone manipulates everyone.”²⁰³

Indeed, aligned interests might actually be detrimental in bringing about long-term peace. As a Sahelian officer puts it, “Isn’t insecurity good for everybody? The militaries gain equipment, the politicians can distract the people’s attention from socio-economic issues and the foreigners can justify their presence.”²⁰⁴ Indeed, focusing on interest alignment can distract from the real needs of the populations. As a French scholar explains, “your talking about interest alignment makes me think of this no-so distant past when Omar Bongo came to Paris, in the midst of the *Françafrique*. He would sit in the President’s Africa advisor’s office, they would order a good bottle of Dom Pérignon and start working on the convergence of interests.”²⁰⁵

Regrettably, the trend in Paris is going towards the pursuit of stability at all costs. Indeed, the French are still somehow traumatized by the consequences of their decision to remove Muammar Kadhafi by force, in 2011, which brought about the collapse of Libya and an unstoppable hemorrhagic of fighters and equipment southwards, towards the Sahel. Strikingly, Sahelian leaders never miss a chance to heavily criticize this decision—at which time, as Burkina Faso’s president Kaboré declared, “the African solution [...], which was to find an internal solution, was dismissed out of hand”²⁰⁶—which puts additional diplomatic pressure on France not to repeat this mistake. Therefore, Paris’ military circles find consensus in supporting stability, even when this means propping authoritarian leaders such as Idriss Déby. As a former French officer accounted:

“Why should we refuse to speak to 80/100 leaders in the world? We are in the business of *Realpolitik*. All the great International Relations theorists have said it: leaders should not speak exclusively with those who resemble them. Leaders should find allies according to common interests. There might be problems with Idriss Déby but one should not condemn a regime because of issues with its leader. If there’s common interests, like fighting terrorism, then we’ll work with Chad.”²⁰⁷

²⁰² Interview with French senior officer, phone call, 2019

²⁰³ Interview with French senior officer, Paris, 2019

²⁰⁴ Interview with Sahelian senior officer, Washington, D.C., 2018

²⁰⁵ Interview with French scholar, phone call, 2019

²⁰⁶ Le Monde. (2019, May 2). A Ouagadougou, Angela Merkel appelle à aider les pays du Sahel dans leur lutte contre le terrorisme.

²⁰⁷ Interview with former French senior officer, phone call, 2019.

Another French officer provided a very telling metaphor: “if a Volcano erupts, leaking lava, even if you know that it’s going to provide you with a great fertile land in the future, you don’t plant seed straight away, you run.”²⁰⁸

However, it is also important to nuance the argument according to which Western powers should avoid working with ill-suited governments and favor civil society over regimes. Indeed, in the case of Mali, in the 1990s, “it was thought by international fund providers that the Malian government was so corrupt that it was unworthy of working directly with. The result of this was a profound de-legitimizing and weakening of the Malian state. There was no police and no justice, it was a complete deliquescence.”²⁰⁹ This development echoes Ferguson’s work²¹⁰, that by creating monopolies on basic services such as education or healthcare, NGOs and international developmental organizations provide African states with a new ‘governmentality’ that seats on top of the existing structure. This is echoed by Duffield who argues that developmental organizations exercise a contingent sovereignty that threatens the social contract built by the State with its population.²¹¹

The capacity of security force assistance to provide tangible results on the ground is thus dependent on resolving two crucial tension points. The first one is between the proponents Westphalian vision of international relations whereby sovereignty imposes to only work with regimes, whoever they might be, and those who argue that good governance standards are worth keeping up, even to the risk of weakening an autocratic regime. Closely related to this is the tension between short term thinking—stability at all costs—and long-term thinking—it might be worth going through periods of instability to gain longer term peace.

²⁰⁸ Interview with French senior officer, Paris, 2019.

²⁰⁹ Interview with French former diplomat, Paris, 2019.

²¹⁰ Ferguson, J. (1990). *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development', Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Ferguson, J. (2006) *Global shadows: Africa in the neoliberal world order*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Ferguson, J. (2005) ‘Seeing Like an Oil Company: Space, Security, and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa’ *American Anthropologist* 107:3.

²¹¹ Duffield, M. (2014). *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*. London: Zed Books; Duffield, Mark, (2002) ‘Social Reconstruction and the Radicalization of Development: Aid as a Relation of Global Liberal Governance’, *Development and Change* 33, no. 5

Conclusion

This thesis asked what makes counterterrorism security force assistance work, by studying the context of counterterrorism in the Sahel and argued that its success depends on three factors: first, the major power's ability to put in place a credible conditionality framework; second, the local partner's capacity and, thirdly, its willingness to comply with the major power's agenda.

Regarding conditionality, this thesis demonstrated that there is a stark difference between the French and American approaches to the terrorist threat in the Sahel. While the U.S. SFA policy that seeks to conduct work by, with and through local partners to tackle terrorism in the Sahel is the natural result of its objectives to reduce its global troop footprint and to contain costs, France displays a significant level of ambiguity in the strategy guiding its policy. On the one hand, French public discourse advocates SFA to promote "African solutions to African problems." However, on the other hand, the country's involvement in the Sahel plays a vital part in both its global strategy as a middle power and the financial and political claims of its military. Therefore, counterterrorism SFA in the Sahel is more vital for France than it is for the United States. This has clear and immediate repercussions on the success of SFA insofar as it prevents France from putting forward a credible conditionality framework: France simply has too much at stake in its involvement to provide credible incentives to its local partners that the time is ripe for them to take care of their security issues.

Regarding the variables of capacity and willingness to cooperate, Mali finds itself on the lower end of the spectrum because of its paralyzed institutions and dependence on external aid which does not encourage Bamako to scale up its counterterrorism capacity. Chad occupies the higher end of the spectrum because of the radical effectiveness of its security apparatus. The Chadian ruling regime has also garnered high dividends from complying with the Western desire for a stable partner in the region. However, in the longer term, the fragility of non-military institutions as well as high ethnic tensions indicate that Chad might become a powder-keg. While Burkina Faso and Niger do not fare especially well as far as their security effectiveness is concerned, their democratic institutions promise longer-term stability and real structural policies to counter violent extremism.

Several implications for policy makers emanate from this discussion. First, at a theoretical level, the need to envisage counterterrorism partnerships through a political lens, as opposed as from a sole technical point of view, cannot be over-emphasized. Only then can the multifaceted

dynamics of the cooperation between the major power and its local partners truly be comprehended. A second policy implication is that it is crucial for external powers to offer a clear conditionality framework along with their security assistance missions. It is important to maintain an ability to sanction the partner country for non-compliance. A solution to this would be to continue building deeper bilateral relationships with local partners where there is a lot at stake beyond military help. France should develop a credible exit strategy which would require its military to be less dependent on their operation in the Sahel. Building on this, the French executive should therefore re-equilibrate the balance of powers of its involvement in the Sahel and allow its diplomatic and international development institutions to have more influence on the dossier. Clearer conditionality would also require Western leaders not to refrain from publicly criticizing their Sahelian counterparts when need be, which so far seems impossible in the case of France. A third policy implication that emanates from this is that SFA warrants tailored approaches rather than one-size-fits-all canvasses. It is crucial for the major power to engage in deep and multidimensional intelligence gathering on the local partner so as to construct a clear image of both its capacity and willingness to engage in meaningful work. A fourth lesson is that the context of the Western focus on obtaining quick results from their local partners favors authoritarian regimes like Chad that are able to provide short term stability albeit at the cost of human rights and long-term peace.²¹² It is deeply preoccupying that, as Whitaker argues, “authoritarian governments may be better able to comply with international agreements.”²¹³ The high dividends that such regimes are able to garner from this transactional, security-driven relationship with the West can be argued to slow African democratization, if not encourage illiberal state building. A fifth and final lesson is the need to offer developmental solutions that complement military solutions, for counterterrorism truly is a multisectoral endeavor. Part of this developmental work should focus on providing trust and capacity building measures in order to improve regional cooperation. Improving the capacity of action of both the G5 Sahel and its military wing, the FC-G5S, should be the main focus in the years to come. Indeed, “the longer-term fight against extremism requires stronger and more legitimate public institutions, not more strongmen.”²¹⁴ As I have previously argued, “policy makers should

²¹² Interview with a Sahel researcher. Stanford, CA, 2018.

²¹³ Whitaker, B. (2010). Compliance among weak states: Africa and the counter-terrorism regime. *Review of International Studies*, 36(3), 639-662.

²¹⁴ Moncrieff, Richard. (2017). In Backing Chad, the West Faces Moral Hazards. *International Crisis Group*.

avoid taking the ill-fated short-cut which claims that state-centric securitization trumps democratization and human development in making Africa safer.”²¹⁵

A substantial agenda for future research remains to be outlined. Throughout my interviews, it emerged that most of the practitioners that I talked to were taken aback when asked “how do you think that your actions are perceived by your Sahelian counterparts?” or “let’s suppose that you were your Sahelian counterpart and that I was interviewing you, what would you be telling me?” This has convinced me that more research needs to be conducted on the ways in which the major power’s policies are perceived, understood and conceptualized by the local partner. More specifically, it would be fascinating to understand more about the ways in which conditionality frameworks—and especially the credibility thereof—are seen by those at the recipient end. Another area worthy of significant further research lies in the comparison between French and American approaches to the challenges of SFA. More theaters of operations where both countries are involved should therefore be studied. This could also involve past theaters, such as Indochina/Vietnam, where France and the U.S. engaged in proxy and direct operations one after the other in the 1950s and 1960s. On this note, it would be interesting to study the extent to which the West’s light footprint counterterrorism strategy in third countries resembles the containment strategy and proxy warfare during the Cold War in Africa. Seeing how the latter led to a stalemate that benefitted the reinforcement of illiberal regimes, such a study would also provide wise policy implications in the context of a counterterrorism strategy that should be aimed at providing peace, security and development for local communities.

²¹⁵ Mirolo, M. (2017). FROM STATE SECURITY TO REGIME SECURITY. Exploring the relationship between the securitization of development and regime security through the case study of counter-terrorism in Chad. *Unpublished*

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ANNEX A Interview list (62 interviews)

Please note: for confidentiality reasons, 10 interviews are listed on background

Policy-makers:

Mr Grant Harris, phone call, 22/02/19, Former Special Assistant to President Barack Obama and Senior Director for African Affairs at the White House from August 2011 to August 2015.

Dr. Thomas Melonio, Paris 04/01/19 Former Africa Senior Advisor to French President François Hollande (Conseiller Afrique)

Prof. Jeremy Weinstein Stanford, CA 04/12/18 Professor of Political Sciences, Stanford University, former deputy U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, former Director for Development and Democracy at the U.S. National Security Council

Prof. Colin Kahl Stanford, CA 29/11/18 Senior Fellow, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, Former National Security Advisor to Vice-President Biden

General H.R. McMaster Stanford, CA 11/12/18 Former U.S. National Security Advisor to President Trump

Mr. Ahmedou Ould Abdallah Phone call 25/04/2019 Former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Ambassador to the European Union and the United States of America of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania

Diplomats :

Ambassador Jean-Marc Chataigner Paris 07/01/19 Ambassador, French Special Envoy to the Sahel

Ambassador Nicolas Normand, Paris, 01/03/19, Former French ambassador to Mali, Congo and Sénégal.

Ambassador Michel Reveyrand de Menthon, Paris, 01/03/19, Former French Ambassador to Mali and Chad, former EU Special Envoy for the Sahel.

Mr. Jérôme Spinoza, Paris, 01/03/19, Cellule Sahel, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères.

Ambassador James Pardew, Vienna, 07/03/19, Former deputy intelligence director at the US Department of Defense, former US Ambassador to Bulgaria.

Ms. Estelle Fériaud Paris 08/01/19 Secrétaire des Affaires Étrangères, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères.

Ms. Kate McFarland Washington, D.C. 22/10/18 Foreign Affairs Officer, US Department of State

Ambassador Johnnie Carson Phone call 08/11/18 Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Ambassador to Uganda, Zimbabwe and Kenya

Ambassador Michael McFaul Stanford, CA 11/02/19 Director, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia

Mr. Sébastien Fagart, Vienna, Austria, 04/02/19, First Counselor, French Embassy in Austria.

***French diplomat on background**, Paris, 08/01/19*

***French diplomat on background**, Paris, 08/01/19*

***French diplomat on background**, Paris, 08/01/19*

***US State Department official on background**, Washington, D.C., 24/10/18*

US State Department official on background, phone call, 14/11/18

Sahelian senior military commander on background, Washington, D.C., 23/10/18

French diplomat on background, Vienna, 22/05/19

Military:

General Karl Eikenberry Stanford, CA 12/12/18 Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan

Colonel Frédéric Garnier, Paris, 01/03/19, Directeur du département Afrique, DGRIS, Ministère des Armées.

Lieutenant-Colonel Yves-Nicolas Dosser, Paris, 01/03/19, Chargé de mission département Afrique, DGRIS, Ministère des Armées

Lieutenant-Colonel Jean-Baptiste Matton, Phone call, 16/02/19, Deputy Liaison Officer to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Ms. Elodie Riche Paris 07/01/19 Chargée de Mission Sahel à la Direction Générale des Relations internationales et de la Stratégie, Ministère des Armées.

Colonel-Major Tuandaba Coulibaly Paris 10/01/19 Attaché de Défense de l'Ambassade du Burkina Faso à Paris, ancien chef d'État-Major de la Gendarmerie Nationale

Colonel-Major Boubacar Keita Paris 10/01/19 Attaché de Défense de l'Ambassade du Mali en France, ancien directeur des renseignements militaires

Colonel Alain Vidal Paris 11/01/19, Commandant du Centre Terre pour le Partenariat Stratégique Opérationnel, Armée de Terre.

Colonel Wynne Beers Phone call 14/11/19 U.S. Department of State Counterterrorism Division

Major Stefan Steyaert Phone call 19/04/19 Belgian liaison officer at the United States' Africa Command (AFRICOM)

Lieutenant-Colonel Franck Gagniou Vienna, AT 23/04/2019 Former chief of training of the EUCAP Sahel mission in Mali

Colonel Christian Bachmann, Vienna, AT, 31/05/19, Former head of the French Army's contingent in the *Épervier* operation, Chad

French senior military commander, Paris, 08/01/19

French senior military commander and intelligence officer, Phone call 08/03/19

Academics:

Mr. Nicolas Desgrais, Paris, 01/03/19, Doctoral student, University of Kent

Prof. Dominique Connan, Phone call 22/02/19, Professor of Political Sciences, Université d'Amiens

Dr. Benedikt Erforth, Phone call, 14/02/19, Teaching Fellow, Sciences Po

Prof. Stephen Tankel 24/10/18 Assistant Professor in the School of International Service at American University

Prof. Martha Crenshaw Stanford, CA 28/09/18 Senior Fellow, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University

Prof. Jake Shapiro Stanford, CA 01/11/18 Professor of Political Sciences, Princeton University

Prof. Alex Thurston Phone call 02/11/18 Assistant Professor of Political Sciences, Miami University

Prof. David Laitin Stanford, CA 26/09/18 Professor of Political Sciences, Stanford University

Prof. James Fearson Stanford, CA 03/10/18 Professor of Political Sciences, Stanford University

Dr. Asfandiyar Mir Stanford, CA 08/10/18 Postdoctoral Fellow, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University

Think tanks:

Dr. Maya Kandel Paris 07/01/19 Chargée de Mission au Centre d'Analyse de Prévention de de Stratégie, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères.

Mr. Rinaldo Depagne, Phone call 06/03/19, Sahel Projet Director, International Crisis Group.

Dr. Corentin Cohen Paris 09/01/19 Chargé de Mission au Centre d'Analyse, de Prévention et de Stratégie, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères.

Dr. Denis Tull Paris 09/01/19 Chercheur Afrique de l'Ouest à l'Institut de Recherches Stratégiques de l'École Militaire (IRSEM)

Mr. Mike Kraft Washington, D.C. 23/10/18 Counterterrorism consultant

Dr. Michael Shurkin Washington, D.C. 24/10/18 Senior Political Scientist, RAND Corporation, former Central Intelligence Agency analyst

Prof. Landry Signé Washington, D.C. 23/10/18 Fellow, Brookings Institution

Dr. Judd Devermont Phone call 30/01/19 Director of the Africa Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies, former National Intelligence Officer for Africa.

Dr. Ibrahim Yahaya Phone call 14/11/18 Sahel Analyst, International Crisis Group

Dr. Thierry Vircoulon, Phone call, 28/01/19, Chercheur Associé au Centre Afrique Subsaharienne de l'IFRI

Dr. Roland Marchal, Phone call, 11/02/19, Chargé de recherche au CNRS et basé au laboratoire du Centre de recherches internationales (CERI-Sciences Po)

Ms. Alice Hunt Friend Washington, D.C. 22/10/18 Senior Fellow, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Dr. Alexis Arieff Washington, D.C. 26/10/18 Specialist in African Affairs, Congressional Research Service

Dr. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, Phone call 11/03/19 Directeur de Recherche à l'Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD)

Paul Absalon, phone call 11/06/19, independent political violence analyst in Burkina Faso, formerly Security Risk Management Advisor at the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit.

International organizations:

Dr. Claudia Croci, Phone call 28/03/19 Senior Specialist at the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR)

United Nations senior official on background, Bratislava, Slovakia, 2019.

ANNEX B Non-exhaustive summary of questions asked (semi-structured interview):

General questions:

How would you characterize the alignment of interests between France, the US and the Sahelian governments?

(to military officers): please describe the extent of the military-to-military cooperation between your country and?

(to African military officers): how important is French and US assistance to the functioning of your country's military?

(to African diplomats): what is the opinion of the population regarding the French and US military presence in your country?

(To Western military officers): are assistance packages contingent on the local agents' success in reducing threats?

(To Western diplomats): how do you take into account the local context in applying your strategy to a particular country?

(To Western diplomats): how do you tackle the issue of information asymmetry between the locals and the intervening power?

(To Western diplomats): what pressure mechanisms are available to punish non-compliance by the local agent?

Discrepancies and overlap between US / French strategies and policy outcomes:

US Sahel policy tactical vs French US policy strategic?

US dealt with at a working level in the US vs political level in France?

Do American policy-makers/military consider Serval/Barkhane a success?

What effect did the Serval/Barkhane operation have on Franco-US politico-military relations?

Is the Sahel a 'laboratory' of a new form of US counterterrorism engagement?

Does this create a strategic opportunity for militaries likes France's to lead operations?

What is the future of Barkhane? Is France inspired by the US' light footprint approach?