



UNIVERSITY OF TRENTO - Italy

**School of International Studies**

# **Thinking Security:**

A Reflectivist Approach to France's  
Security Policy-Making in sub-Saharan  
Africa

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# Abstract

Recent years have witnessed increased French military activism in Africa. Despite efforts to normalise its post-colonial relationship and considerable downsizing of its permanent military presence, France remains a sought-after actor in solving African security problems. Notwithstanding French decision-makers' repeated promises that the gendarme of Africa belongs to the past, French troops have participated in nine military operations since the turn of the millennium. Against all expectations, the Hollande administration has stood out for being particularly interventionist, concerting a military intervention in Mali and deploying a peacekeeping force to the Central African Republic within two years of assuming office. The ambiguity between an interventionist policy and a disengaged discourse suggests that French military interventionism in sub-Saharan Africa no longer follows the same automaticity as in the past. The two interventions in Mali and the CAR testify to the intense ideational struggles between different belief systems that had shaped French actors' minds and thus influenced decision-making processes and policy outcomes.

Economic interests and neo-colonial continuity have been traditionally identified as the root causes of French interventionism in francophone Africa. For the past two decades the literature on French-African relations has been dominated by the so-called continuity vs. change debate, which scrutinises the presence of colonial / neo-colonial practices in the post-1990 French foreign policy. While ideational approaches to France's African policy are not rare, few studies have engaged with the decision-making processes that produce French military interventions. Most studies focus on policy outcomes, which are rooted in static conceptualisations of ideas that are aggregated at the level of the state. Starting from these observations, the present study argues that the mere analysis of policy outcomes tells us little about the actual motivations that drive French foreign and security policy in Africa.

Instead of analysing French interventionism by relying on a predefined set of explanatory variables that are juxtaposed with a series of observable outcomes in order to falsify predefined hypotheses, this thesis explains French interventionism by drawing on actors' subjective perceptions and motivations. The study uses the actors' own utterances to explain why French decision-makers are ready to accept the considerable risks and costs involved in guaranteeing or re-establishing the security of African countries. Adopting an actor-centred constructivist ontology, this study not only identifies ideas as core explanatory variables but also traces their emergence and subsequent development throughout decision-making processes. This approach goes beyond the dichotomous view that reduces French motivations to material interests or post-colonial ambitions.

Relying on discursive material such as official statements, verbatim reports of press conferences and parliamentary hearings, policy reports, and thirty-two high-level interviews with French decision-makers, the present study narrates military intervention in Mali and the CAR from the perspective of French foreign policy elites under the Hollande Presidency. This recent and largely unexplored empirical material provides new insights into France's foreign and defence policy. The study also demonstrates why and how the "Africa factor" still matters in France's foreign policy considerations. The importance of Africa in France's security policy has less to do with neo-colonial ambitions per se, than with the understanding French policy-makers have of themselves and their country. More generally, the findings show how comprehensive explanations of foreign policy can be produced by considering actors' subjective perceptions. In so doing, the study not only explains France's current policies in sub-Saharan Africa, but also offers insights into foreign policy decision-making processes in general, and thereby provides further evidence about how ideational factors influence the making of world politics.

**Keywords:** France, Africa, Mali, CAR, foreign policy analysis, international security, decision-making, political psychology, constructivism



*No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world.*  
—Robin Williams as John Keating in *Dead Poets' Society*

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# List of Abbreviations

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| APF     | African Peace Facility  |
| AFD     | Agence Française de Développement (French Agency for Development)   |
| AFISMA  | African-led International Support Mission to Mali   |
| AFRICOM | African Command   |
| AMISOM  | African Union Mission in Somalia  |
| AQIM    | Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb   |
| AQMI    | Al-Qaida au Maghreb Islamique (see AQIM)  |
| APSA    | Architecture de Paix et de Sécurité en Afrique (African Peace and Security Architecture),   |
| AU      | African Union   |
| CAPS    | Centre d'Analyse, de Prévision et de Stratégie (Policy Planning Staff)  |
| CAR     | Central African Republic  |
| CEDEAO  | Communauté Économique des États de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (see ECOWAS)  |
| CEMA    | Chef d'État-Major des Armées (Chief of the Military Staff)  |
| CEMAC   | Communauté Économique et Monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale (Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa)  |
| CEMP    | Chef d'État-Major Particulier (Chief of the Military Staff of the President)  |
| CFA     | Communautés Financières d'Afrique   |
| CIS     | Commonwealth of Independent States  |
| CNN     | Cable News Network  |
| CNRDR   | Comité National pour le Redressement de la Démocratie et la Restauration de l'État (National Commission for the Recovery of Democracy and the Restoration of the State) |
| CPCO    | Centre de Planification et Contrôle des Opérations (Centre for Operational Planning and Control)  |
| CPJP    | Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace  |
| CPSK    | Convention for the Salvation of Kodro (Sango for country)   |
| DAS     | Délégations aux Affaires Stratégiques (Delegation for Strategic Affairs)  |
| DCSD    | Direction de la Coopération de Sécurité et de Défense (Directorate General for Cooperation in Security and Defence Matters)   |
| DGSE    | Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (General Directorate for External Security)  |
| DRC     | Democratic Republic of Congo  |
| ECCAS   | Economic Community of Central African States  |

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| ECOWAS   | Economic Community of West African States   |
| EFAO     | Éléments Français d'Assistance Opérationnelle (Operational Support Troops)  |
| EMU      | European Monetary Union   |
| ENA      | École Nationale d'Administration (National School of Administration)  |
| ENVR     | École Nationale à Vocation Régionale (National School with Regional Reach)  |
| ERM      | Early Response Mechanism  |
| EU       | European Union  |
| EUCAP    | European Union Capacity Building Mission  |
| EUFOR    | European Union Force  |
| EUTM     | European Union Training Mission   |
| FACA     | Forces Armées Centrafricaines (Central African Armed Forces)  |
| FDPC     | Front Démocratique du Peuple Centrafricain (Democratic Front of the Central African People)   |
| FOMAC    | Force Multinationale de l'Afrique Centrale (Multinational Force in Central Africa)  |
| FPA      | Foreign Policy Analysis   |
| GIA      | Groupe Islamique Armé (Armed Islamic Group)   |
| GNI      | Gross National Income   |
| GSPC     | Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat)   |
| GWoT     | Global War on Terror  |
| HDI      | Human Development Index   |
| INED     | Institut National d'Études Démographiques (French National Research Institute on Demographics)  |
| IR       | International Relations   |
| IRSEM    | Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire (Institute for Strategic Research at the Military Academy)                                       |
| LRA      | Lord Resistance Army  |
| MICOPAX  | Mission de Consolidation de la Paix en Centrafrique (Mission for the Consolidation of Peace in the Central African Republic)                            |
| MINURCAT | Mission des Nations Unies en République Centrafricaine et Tchad (UN Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad)                                   |
| MINUSMA  | Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali   |
| MISAB    | Mission Interafricaine de Surveillance des Accords de Bangui (Inter-African Mission to Monitor the Bangui Agreements)                                   |
| MISCA    | Mission Internationale de Soutien à la Centrafrique sous Conduite Africaine (African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic) |

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| MISMA  | Mission Internationale de Soutien au Mali sous conduite Africaine (African-led International Support Mission to Mali) |
| MNA    | Mouvement National de l'Azawad (National Movement of Azawad)  |
| MNLA   | Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad)                         |
| MP     | Member of Parliament  |
| MSF    | Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)  |
| MTNM   | Mouvement Touareg du Nord-Mali (Tuareg Movement of Northern Mali)   |
| MUJAO  | Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa)              |
| NATO   | North Atlantic Treaty Organisation  |
| NGO    | Non-governmental Organisation   |
| NRC    | National Role Conceptions   |
| ODA    | Official Development Assistance   |
| OECD   | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development  |
| ONU    | Organisation des Nations Unies (see UN)   |
| PSI    | Pan Sahel Initiative  |
| PSO    | Peace Support Operation   |
| RCA    | République Centrafricaine (see CAR)   |
| RDC    | République Démocratique du Congo (see DRC)  |
| RECAMP | Renforcement des Capacités Africaines de Maintien de la Paix (Reinforcement of African Peacekeeping Capacities)       |
| RPF    | Rwandan Patriotic Front   |
| TSCTP  | Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Partnership   |
| UCDP   | Uppsala Conflict Data Program   |
| UA     | Union Africaine (see AU)  |
| UE     | Union Européenne (see EU)   |
| UFDR   | Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement (Union of Democratic Forces for Unity)                           |
| UN     | United Nations  |
| UNAMIR | United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda  |
| UNIFIL | United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon   |
| UNDP   | United Nations Development Programme  |
| US     | United States   |
| USSR   | Union of Soviet Socialist Republics   |

# Introduction

On the afternoon of 11 January 2013 two Gazelle helicopters with French Special Forces on board, which had taken off from an airbase in Burkina Faso, opened fire on a group of militants gathered in the Malian steppe. Despite the suddenness of the attack the group was able to respond and engaged the Special Forces in a fire fight leaving several militants and one French pilot, Damien Boiteux, dead.<sup>1</sup> Only a few hours later, four Mirage fighter jets of the French Air Force took off from N'Djamena to unload their superior fire power on a rebel hideout in Konna. Fifty militants died in the attack. More Special Forces were flown into Bamako and an armoured regiment based in Côte d'Ivoire set out for Mali. Operation Serval was launched and France was at war. Over the course of the next weeks, the number of French troops deployed to Mali increased steadily and exceeded 4,500 by early February making Operation Serval the largest French foreign intervention since the Algerian War. This military campaign followed President Hollande's decision to help Mali safeguard its sovereignty by stopping the advancing rebel forces and eradicating criminal and terrorist groups, which were gaining ground on Malian territory.

Twelve months later, French troops received the president's orders to intervene in another conflict on the African continent. This time French military action followed the adoption of UN Resolution 2127 on 5 December 2013. Prior to that, French troops based at M'Poko airport in Bangui had been reinforced during the month of November. Within hours of the presidential order an additional 600 troops landed in the Central African Republic (CAR) to curb the sectarian violence that was afflicting the country. Operation Sangaris was launched. Although less spectacular than the blitz operation in Mali, the peacekeeping mission was not less dangerous. Two decades after the Rwandan genocide, French troops were once again entrenched in a civil war where frontlines were blurred and it was hard to distinguish the perpetrators from the victims.

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<sup>1</sup> In the months following his death, Damien Boiteux became a martyr of the French intervention. Policy-makers evoked his name to refer to the courage of the French Army and the sacrifices France was willing to shoulder. New-born babies in Mali and a military camp were named after him.

At first sight, these two tableaux are strong reminders of the early post-colonial era when French troops in Africa still numbered 60,000 and France was the uncontested guarantor of stability in its former African colonies. At that time, French paratroopers intervened on a regular basis to support or topple African governments very much at Paris's discretion. However, the above descriptions do not belong to some distant past but to 2013, a year that marked France's military reengagement on the African continent. The present study ponders France's new interventionism on the African continent by examining the decision-making processes that have led to the two military operations respectively. It questions the principal actors' perceptions and mental maps and thus provides a set of reasons to help explain the Hollande administration's willingness to deploy troops in two conflicts within its former colonial sphere.

Over the last decade or so, Africa has played a more central role in the global system.<sup>2</sup> Increased investment opportunities pique the interest of all major world powers and have made the African continent a crowded, highly attractive, and heavily wooed fairground for both state and non-state actors (Carmody 2011, 1; Severino and Ray 2011). China has been one of the most active players in Africa (Alden 2007), but the United States, Russia, Brazil, India, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have also been establishing themselves as the preferred partners of several African countries and increasingly compete over access to resources and markets. This substantial economic interest in the African continent is accompanied by an increased emancipation of African state actors on the international scene and the simultaneous marginalisation of traditional foreign actors (read: former European colonial powers). Besides the cornucopia of resources and the many still unsaturated markets that stir the blood of investors, Africa's security and the continent's (in)stability have attracted the attention of all major global powers. In contrast to the economic realm, the realm of security remains more resistant to change and reproduces old patterns of an established hierarchical order. Traditional foreign actors from the

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<sup>2</sup> I employ the terms Africa and francophone Africa almost interchangeably throughout this study as a means of designating the sub-Saharan African region. There are two reasons for this choice. First, this definition complies with the use of the term in the French discourse. The French discourse distinguishes between sub-Saharan (*l'Afrique*) and North Africa (*les pays du Maghreb/ de l'Afrique du Nord*). Second, whilst most claims indeed apply to francophone countries more than to the rest of Africa a clear delimitation is no longer possible nor justified. Since the 1990s and the beginning of the *normalisation* process (see below) French actors have advocated a more comprehensive approach to the African continent. Their policies have increasingly addressed non-francophone states that were situated outside of France's traditional *pré carré*.

Global North continue to dominate the discourse and impose many of the security practices in place. Despite repeated claims for African ownership in the security sector, Africa remains the region with most foreign interventions. Whilst in the past colonial and neo-colonial aspirations as well as Cold War strategic and ideological thinking justified foreign intervention on the continent, more recently references to global security, the striving for liberal peace as a response to continuous civil wars, humanitarianism, bad governance (usually framed in more euphemistic terms as lack of good governance), and rising religious fundamentalism often linked to Islamist terrorism are said to have made continuous foreign military interventions necessary (Ignatieff 2003; Barnett 2011; Schmidt 2013; Reid 2014).

Parallel to Africa's emergence in global markets the past decade witnessed an elevated securitisation of the African continent revolving around the concepts of counter-terrorism, state fragility, and humanitarianism. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, George W. Bush, who during the 2000 presidential election campaign had declared that the African continent had no strategic importance to the US, made 'Africa one of his strongest legacies' (Lyman and Robinette 2009, 2). The Bush administration identified an arc of instability as prone to the genesis of anti-Western terror networks reaching from Somalia in the East to Mauritania in the West of Africa (Keenan 2009).<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the succeeding Obama administration demonstrated great interest in African defence and development policies to the point where even critics who doubted the existence of a reorientation in the US's policy towards Africa was a paradigmatic shift acknowledged that 'US policy makers have altered their conception of national interests in the region' (van de Walle 2009, 3). Thanks to the advocacy work of US state actors and others, the 'banana theory' of terrorism, according to which terrorist groups dislodged on a banana shaped route from the Middle East to Africa, quickly began to establish itself as a dominant narrative within the Western-led global security discourse and gave rise to security-driven bilateral cooperation programmes as well as to the more encompassing Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), or the African Peace Facility (APF) (Keenan

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<sup>3</sup> Prior to 9/11, the 'bombing of the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam by Al Qaeda in August 1998 had alerted US officials to the militant Islamic presence in East Africa' (van de Walle 2009, 7).

2007; 2009).<sup>4</sup> In addition, the US military established an African Command (AFRICOM) in 2007.

The belief in the interrelatedness of security and development have reinforced the perceived need for a comprehensive strategy towards Africa among the major global powers. In 2011, the European Union (EU) mobilised €600 million as part of its Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel. This new security interest in Africa made the international community also look towards those powers who had a longstanding experience in military interventionism and showed continuous interest in crisis management in the region. France was one of these and it soon became the US's most important ally in its sub-Saharan counter-terrorism strategy and the EU's "framework nation" on African security (The Economist 2014). In addition to the expectations of the international community and France's allies in the West, it is the continuous demand on the part of the African ruling elites that have made France a particularly sought-after actor when it comes to Africa's and notably francophone Africa's security.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the repeated promises by French decision-makers to reduce their country's military activity in the region, French troops have participated in nine military operations on the African continent since the turn of the millennium. Both Africa's salience on the international security agenda and France's reinvigorated role as the most active foreign security actor in Africa ask for a re-examination of French security policy towards Africa at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Against all odds, the Hollande administration has stood out for being particularly interventionist since taking office in May 2012. Following the March 2011 Franco-British air-strikes that helped topple Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya and France's alleged involvement in the arrest of former Ivorian

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<sup>4</sup> 'Since the creation of the APF in 2004, the EU has committed more than €1.1 billion for Peace Support Operations (PSOs), Capacity-building programmes and the Early Response Mechanism (ERM). The three on-going Peace Support Operations are AMISOM (the AU Mission in Somalia), MICOPAX (the Mission for the Consolidation of Peace in the Central African Republic) and AFISMA (the African-led International Support Mission to Mali)' (European Commission 2013).

<sup>5</sup> The Global North's inclination to intervene pre-emptively in African crisis situations and to stabilise the continent was endorsed by African leaders who benefit from external financial and political support (Schmidt 2013, 11). A closer examination of this question reveals a less coherent stance on the part of African elites who fear subjugation to foreign actors, while at the same time—and this is true for many cases across the continent—make use of external financial and political assistance to subdue domestic opposition. This creates an operational environment that is often difficult to evaluate for outside actors. For instance, the implementation of AFRICOM was a diplomatic disaster for the US. African opposition prevented the US from establishing its headquarters on the continent and forced the administration to establish AFRICOM's temporary headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany. France's interventions in Côte d'Ivoire and Libya in 2011 were met with as many opponents as advocates in Africa. During the crises in Mali and the CAR, on the other hand, France could count on almost unanimous African support.



President Laurent Gbagbo in April 2011, 2013 definitely marked the return of the infamous *gendarme de l'Afrique*. Within less than two years of assuming office, the Hollande administration pushed for military intervention in Mali and deployed a peacekeeping force in the CAR. In stark contrast to France's persistent vows to disengage, the year saw the country unable to stay away from its traditional backyard.

This is surprising, to say the least, given the non-interventionist approach to foreign policy initially advocated by the Hollande administration. A complete retreat from Afghanistan, further cutbacks to the national defence budget, the firm commitment to put an end to the existing defence agreements between France and its former African colonies—a process that had already begun under the Sarkozy administration—as well as the announcement to reduce France's permanent military presence in sub-Saharan Africa to the strict minimum figured prominently on the socialist government's political agenda (Mélonio 2011, 31). Of course, one could dismiss these statements as empty; however, words were followed by deeds. French troops returned from Afghanistan and the annual defence budget for the period 2014-2019 reduced to 1.5 per cent of France's GDP (€31,4 billion p.a.) entailing a cut of 34,000 posts between now and 2020. Furthermore, given the restructuring of the former African cell, as well as President Hollande's apparent indifference to African affairs and the highly praised narrative of *African solutions to African problems*, it seemed that the socialist government indeed reconfigured its overall defence policy and was finally putting the long-heralded but never fully realised break with France's traditional approach to the African continent into practice. The signs were set on change and all the greater was the surprise when Hollande tipped the carefully constructed narrative of a rupture in the making by ordering a large counter-terrorist operation in the Sahel and subsequently committing further troops to a peacekeeping operation in Central Africa.

French troops had barely set foot on Malian soil when policy-makers in Paris announced the ephemeral nature of the mission and started evoking a troop retreat. The French daily newspaper *Libération* (2013) quotes Hollande on 15 January 2013 as saying, 'France has no vocation to remain in Mali'. Two months later the French contingent reached its maximum strength of 6,000 troops. As of January 2015, 3,000 French troops remained deployed in the Sahel under the framework of the subsequent Operation Barkhane. A similar scenario repeated itself three weeks before Christmas 2013

when French troops were called upon to put an end to the sectarian conflict in the CAR. This time the retreat of French troops was declared even before the launch of the mission and engraved in the operation's code-name Sangaris, named after an African butterfly known for its light footprint and short lifespan. As it turned out, hope and a good portion of optimism dictated the choice of the name rather than an exact evaluation of the difficult situation on the ground. The overall question that arises from above descriptions is how France's two latest military interventions in sub-Saharan Africa can be understood against the backdrop of a general disengagement discourse.

Often France's military engagement in Africa is explained with reference to the well-established narrative of neo-colonial domination. Neo-colonialism as an explanatory variable, however, does not offer any insights as to why discourse and practices in the two cases were fraught with ambiguities. An alternative approach, which finds much support in the existing literature on French foreign policy towards Africa since the 1990s, would explain France's latest military interventions by placing them on a continuity-change continuum. However, such a long-term perspective risks reducing the complexity that defined each of the two decisions at the time of their making. Other explanations have interpreted the political and ideological seesaw described above in terms of a confused French state that lacks a coherent long-term strategy and therefore limits itself to ad hoc reactive policies (Cumming 2013). I contend that such explanations account only partially for the reality on the ground.

The ambiguity between an interventionist policy and a disengaged discourse suggests that French military interventionism in sub-Saharan Africa no longer follows the same automaticity as in the past. The two interventions in Mali and the CAR testify to the intense ideational struggles between different belief systems that had shaped French actors' minds and thus influenced decision-making processes and policy outcomes. Starting from these observations, the present study argues that the mere analysis of policy outcomes tells us little about the actual motivations that drive French foreign and security policy in Africa. To overcome the outcome-orientated bias in the literature on French foreign and security policy in sub-Saharan Africa, this study delves into the processes of the decision-making behind France's latest military interventions. By giving precedence to processes over outcomes and by putting individual actors at the heart of the analysis, the *human face* of decision-making is acknowledged. In other words, this research project engages in the demystification of the French

decision-making processes and aims at providing a more comprehensive response as to why intervention was decided in the two cases. Methodologically, the present work starts from two outcomes, that is, two policy decisions, and asks how these came about by disaggregating the processes leading to their emergence. Instead of resorting to predefined concepts in order to explain the two decisions, the explanations are inductively extracted from the French discourse. Decision-making processes, which often remain overlooked in the field of international relations, are thus the focal point of this study. The story told on these pages is a reconstruction of the events in 2013 and 2014, as experienced by policy-makers in Paris.

France's two last military interventions in Africa—Operation Serval in Mali and Operation Sangaris in the CAR—have been selected as the present study's principal cases for a variety of reasons. First, they reflect a specific category of events that can be labelled as "crisis situations." During crisis situations policy-makers are forced to deviate from the usual path and adapt to new and unknown situations as well as to innovate to some extent. Since crisis situations ask decision-makers to leave familiar terrain and provide solutions to problems that cannot be solved by simply resorting to standard operating procedures, they constitute instances of increased cognitive and meaning-giving activity. In other words, crisis situations challenge ordinariness per definition and make room for new ideas and new agendas. At the same time, imposing change always remains a difficult undertaking and the innovative policy-maker will encounter resistance.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, times of crises are times of struggles between different competing ideas, concepts, and approaches. Crisis situations provoke explicit and audible pronouncements of otherwise silently implied assumptions. Finally, as Widmaier (2007, 785) points out, crisis-constructions have their own dynamics that unfold during the process, and which in turn may become '(re)constitutive of state and societal interests'. For the social scientist interested in the explanatory power of ideational variables, they constitute an ideal hunting ground. Second, the two cases represent today's two dominant global securitisation narratives and were categorised according to the two major justifications for foreign intervention: global terrorism and humanitarianism.

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<sup>6</sup> Resistance can also be located within the individual who intends to promote change. Individuals look back to familiar conceptualisation of the past and the present when analysing the unknown. Consequently, human-beings tend to favour continuity over radical change most of the time.

Juxtaposing the two cases allows for an emphasis on the differences and similarities between these two concepts and points to the apparent complementarity that decision-makers attribute to them, which in turn explains the genesis of similar solutions in fundamentally different situations. Third, the fact that the two intervened nations are both situated in France's former francophone African backyard allow for some general conclusions about present-day French security policy in Africa. The two cases unsheathe the ideas, conceptions, and attitudes that French policy-makers hold vis-à-vis Africa in general and francophone Africa in particular. Fourth, and this is related to France's role and position in the EU and the UN, a better understanding of the motivations for intervention in the French foreign policy apparatus also sheds light on common positions taken by the EU or the UN Security Council on defence matters in Africa. France's political weight in those two institutions remains considerable, as one can see from the latter's frequent alignment to the French position. In particular in the EU, France remains the principal—if not only—agenda setter in matters of African security. Already prior to the French engagement in Mali and the CAR, France assumed the role of the lead or framework nation in each of the EU-led missions to Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) 2003 and 2006, Chad and CAR 2007-08) (Olsen 2009). Referring to the 2003 EU Operation Artemis under French command in the DRC, Utley (2005, 35) wonders whether this was not just another French operation in a multilateral guise.

The work on this project began in 2011. At that time neither the crisis in Mali nor the one in the CAR had erupted. While initial signs of instability were perceived in the case of Mali, the CAR was entirely absent from international security agendas. In a certain sense, the final shape of this work owes much to the course history has taken over the past three years. As the crises in Mali and the CAR evolved, so has this thesis's structure. In order to examine two such recent events, the analysis needs to maintain a certain degree of flexibility and be able to respond to the challenges of a moving empirical target. One could oppose this research on the grounds that such an exercise can only be achieved at the cost of analytical depth. Critics could further point out that access to sensitive and classified information is still restricted. For this and other reasons, data that has been locked behind the iron doors of national archives before being released usually enjoys an aura of greater authority over contemporary public discourse, which all too often is equated with *public fooling*. Whilst these are valid concerns—and

especially when questions of national security are at stake—they should not be a hindrance to conducting timely research.<sup>7</sup> I have two responses to this sort of criticism: one stating the obvious and the other turning an apparent constraint into a desirable opportunity. To refute the feasibility of analysing the military interventions in Mali and the CAR for the seeming lack of reliable data would only leave the alternative of capitulating before this challenge. I am happy to accept the risk of erring where the data is obfuscated in exchange for the possibility to get parts of the story right.<sup>8</sup> More importantly, however, the past two years have provided me with the unique opportunity to follow two decision-making processes of foreign and security policy-making closely. As the decision-making processes and this project concurrently developed, the analysis of the events on the ground can be said to have taken place in real-time. This is a veritable advantage, since the purpose of this study is the reconstruction of an actor-specific explanation of the decisions to intervene in each of the two cases. I have been able to trace the emergence of policy ideas, the struggles between them, the demise of some and the victory of others.

This thesis is comprised of five chapters, contained in two parts. The first part elaborates the conceptual tools used, which are then applied in the second part to analyse the two selected cases of French interventionism in sub-Saharan Africa. The theoretical and empirical findings are drawn together in the conclusion. *Chapter One* reviews the existing literature on French security policy towards Africa. By examining three strands of literature, the chapter establishes a comprehensive summary of French foreign policy in general and French security and defence policy in Africa in particular. The chapter covers the period between the foundation of the Fifth Republic in 1958 and today, but it focuses in particular on the last two decades of French involvement in Africa. Pointing to some shortcomings and gaps in the existing literature, such as the overt bias towards the past and the conceptual rigidity of many existing approaches, the chapter establishes the rationale for the present study by identifying how and why an ideational actor-centric analysis of decision-making processes can

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<sup>7</sup> A more detailed evaluation of the different data is offered in Chapter Two.

<sup>8</sup> The Cuban Missile Crisis is a telling example of how early political analyses and later historical studies were able to complement each other and to provide a comprehensive account of the decision-making processes at work during one of the Cold War's most serious crises (Allison and Zelikow 1999 [1971]; Munton and Welch 2007; George 2013).

contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of French security policy in Africa at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Drawing on the findings from the review of the literature, *Chapter Two* establishes the thesis's theoretical framework, which will subsequently be used to examine the two case studies. The framework contends that structure and agency are relational to each other. Actors' belief systems and mental maps are the prisms between brute and social facts. They are accessible through an analysis of discourse and practices, that is, the observable consequences that ideas produce. In a second section, this chapter advances the methodology informing the data collection and the qualitative data analysis. Special attention is paid to discourse and content analytical tools and their operationalisation.

*Chapter Three* constitutes the link between the conceptual and the empirical part of this dissertation. It develops a definition of agency, which is central to the thesis's argument. It addresses the question of who can be considered an agent of foreign policy-making and provides an answer in the context of France. The different decision-units are introduced and their interactions are highlighted. According to the respective stage of the decision-making process, different actors come to the forefront. Overall, the final decisional power remains concentrated in what I call the decisional-triangle, which comprises the president, the foreign minister, and the defence minister, with the president enjoying the largest (although not absolute) authority.

*Chapter Four* is the first out of two empirical chapters applying the theoretical framework to French interventionism in sub-Saharan Africa. After a short description of the underlying causes and dynamics that led to the emergence of the security crisis in Mali with a special focus on the Tuareg question and the rise of Islamist terrorism, the chapter dissects the French decision-making process leading up to the launch of Operation Serval on 11 January 2013 and France's vigorous engagement in the Global War on Terror (GWOt). This chapter addresses the underlying question of how and why a shift in discourse and practice from a no-boots-on-the-ground policy to a quasi-unilateral intervention could occur.<sup>9</sup> In more general terms, the chapter contributes to a better understanding of how the dominant narrative of

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<sup>9</sup> With quasi-unilateral intervention I refer to interventions that bear all characteristics of unilateral interventions in particular at the operational level but enjoy the political support of a larger alliance. Quasi-unilateral interventions are accompanied by an intensive diplomatic activity.

global terrorism, together with the sentiment of proximity, became powerful drivers of interventionism. The analysis of the decision-making processes in this and the following chapter are divided into three stages: the inclusion of the crisis on the French security agenda, its framing and diffusion, and the decision itself. This tripartite structure has been chosen to ensure a clear and readable account. In reality, the three phases are not strictly separated from each other but overlap.

*Chapter Five* deals with the concept of humanitarian interventionism, the alleged principal motivation behind Operation Sangaris in the CAR. Like Chapter Four, the first section provides a background note on the political and security situation in the CAR and traces the principal causes of inter-ethnic and inter-communal violence that engulfed the CAR. The remainder of this chapter discusses the French decision-making process and shows how the eventual solution emerged from intensive struggles between different sets of principles. It also suggests that the intervention in the CAR was as much a product of the French actors' self-perception and a response to the actors' quest for honour and standing as it was a product of a needs-based assessment of the situation on the ground.

In conclusion, allow me to paraphrase Allison (1999 [1971]) in saying that this study attempts to address the entire foreign policy community, which comprises both "artists" and "scientists". For the artist, a detailed analysis of the decision-making procedures that led to the two military operations may be particularly palatable. To my knowledge, there exists no detailed examination of decision-making processes that explains France's military interventions in Mali and the CAR. Chapters Four and Five remedy this deficit. Each can be read as stand-alone chapter. But it is only in conjunction with each other that the comparative dimension of the present study becomes visible. For the scientist, the theoretical framework and its application to the rough terrain of empirical reality may bear the greatest interest and be considered the actual contribution of this work. A first understanding of the study's theoretical framework and its implications can be gained by looking at Chapter Two as well as the conclusion. By applying an ideational framework to two recent instances of decision-making I seek to contribute to the debate on ideational foreign policy analysis and, in particular, show that a theoretically informed empirical investigation is not only feasible but can provide powerful explanations and yield new and interesting results that go beyond the case of French security policy in Africa itself.

# Chapter One

## French Security Policy in Africa: A Review of the Literature

*France is not really itself unless it has a rank*

—Charles de Gaulle

*Dès ma prise de fonction, j'ai dit que plusieurs traits dessinaient, en effet, la position tout-à-fait particulière de notre pays dans le monde et j'ai qualifié la France de «puissance d'influence».*

—Laurent Fabius

France's relations with the African continent have captivated the French and international media and fuelled intellectual and political debates for many years. Being at the heart of French foreign policy, France's Africa policy is inextricably intertwined with the country's national identity. It both determines and is determined by French national identity and constitutes an integral component of policy-makers' role conception as representatives of a *puissance d'influence* (influential power). France's position in Europe and the world is to a large extent shaped by its role in Africa. Although French policy-making in Africa ranges from the economic and the political to the cultural realms, the most visible manifestation of French activism remains the military domain.

Given its salience in both public and academic debates the topic has led to a large number of publications over the past four decades. Academic articles are flanked by op-eds and detailed case studies written by pundits with specific political agendas in mind. Advocates (L. Dominici and F. Dominici 2005) and opponents (Verschave 1998; Verschave 2000; Foutoyet 2009) of the special Franco-African relationship vie with each other for the prerogative of interpretation. Journalists, public intellectuals, politicians, diplomats, business elites, and human rights activists, all make strong truth



claims about what is the Franco-African relationship and what it should be. Truth and myth blend in those debates. Although all social phenomena are a combination of fact and fiction (Lebow 2010, 276–83), the case of the Franco-African relationship and French policy-making in Africa remains exceptional by force of the highly politicised and emotional nature of the topic. An exceptionally high degree of normativity also shaped the debates about Mali and the CAR.

For the time being, most studies dealing with Operation Serval in Mali and Operation Sangaris in the CAR are written by either journalists or political commentators who are familiar with the actors and practices of French policy-making in Africa and, as many of them proudly underline, are fine connoisseurs of the African continent. While enriching the debate with precise recitals of observable facts, detailed descriptions of operational plans and military campaigns, and confidential accounts from within the decision-making apparatus, the large majority of these contributions ignore the merits of theory-driven social enquiry (Lasserre and Oberlé 2013; Flichy 2013; Perret 2014; Flichy, Mézin-Bourginaud, and Mathias 2014; Notin 2014). Published work by academics on the two military operations has hitherto mostly been limited to short briefing notes or op-eds as well as some longer studies emanating from the think-tank milieu (Arieff 2013b; Durand 2013; Heisbourg 2013; Koepf 2013a; Marchal 2013a; Marchal 2013b; Mehler 2013; Wing 2013; *IRIN News* 2014; Barrios and Koepf 2014). To my knowledge, no foreign policy analysis has yet examined the decision-making processes behind France's two latest military interventions in detail.<sup>10</sup>

We can begin to place the Malian and Central African cases within the broader debates of France's security policy-making in sub-Saharan Africa. To do so, the present chapter reviews three strands of literature that account for the major debates and current state of research on French foreign and security policy-making in Africa. The first part reviews the general characteristics of French foreign policy. The second part introduces the reader to the longstanding relationship between France and parts of the

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<sup>10</sup> For an exception see Notin (2014) who proposes a process-orientated analysis of Operation Serval. Starting from the inclusion of the Malian crisis on the French political agenda, the author provides a detailed account of the different stages of the decision-making process. Drawing on a large number of in-depth interviews with French decision-makers, Notin is able to reconstruct the decision-making process from the perspective of the actors. Several claims I advance in Chapter Five are confirmed by Notin's study. However, Notin exclusively focusses on a reconstruction of the process and is less interested in distinguishing the ideational variables that explain France's activism in more general terms and beyond the immediate threat perception. In addition, his focus lies on the operational and not the political level.

African continent, while the last part focusses more specifically on France's defence and security policy as well as on French interventionism in Africa. By highlighting the trends and shortcomings in the literature, the chapter not only acquaints the reader with the terminologies that shape the debate and situates the study in its broader context but also identifies how an ideational actor-centric analysis of decision-making processes can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of French security policy in Africa.

## 1.1 French Foreign Policy: Between Grandeur and Decline

Foreign policy is a constitutive element of France's national identity (Appleton 2009, 8). Founded in the wake of the Algerian War, the birth of the Fifth Republic was directly related to an external event (Balme 2009, 138). At that time, de Gaulle 'was trying to recreate a nation and a state wrecked by decadence, defeat, and division' (Hoffmann 1960, 142). In search of a place and role in the post-WWII international system for his country he considered a proactive foreign policy the panacea to re-establish France's international standing and to resolve internal divisions (Cerny 1980, 88). De Gaulle was convinced that France still possessed the potential to rank among the world's great powers, despite the undeniable gap in terms of resources and material capacities, which separated France from the US and the USSR. He justified this reasoning with reference to France's history and the symbolic power of a proactive foreign policy, which could compensate for deficits in other realms. Foreign policy decision-making, in other words, was understood as being essential to France's very survival as a nation: 'Since we are not anymore a Great Power, we need a great policy; if we do not have such a great policy, given we are not a Great Power anymore, we won't be anything' (quoted in Bozo 2012, 8).<sup>11</sup> De Gaulle considered the realm of foreign policy as too crucial as to relinquish it to the quarrels of partisan politics and declared it a presidential prerogative (*domaine réservé*). Inherent to the Fifth Republic's institutional DNA was a commitment to making foreign policy central to governing and political

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<sup>11</sup> 'C'est parce que nous ne sommes plus une grande puissance qu'il nous faut une grande politique, parce que, si nous n'avons pas une grande politique, comme nous ne sommes plus une grande puissance, nous ne serons plus rien'.

stability. Central to this was a great power policy and the acknowledgment of partisan politics weakening France externally and thus also creating political instability domestically. Consequently, the longstanding balance between parliamentary dominance and charismatic-authoritarian rule that had characterised the French political system shifted in favour of the latter (Bratberg 2005, 28).

De Gaulle's successors, regardless of their political hue, abided to these basic principles (Bayart 1990, 48). It thus can be argued that these earlier endeavours by the French elite to reconstitute their country's great power status and to regain some of its past glory generated a very specific type of foreign policy, which scholars later defined as foreign policy of projection (*politique étrangère de projection*) and which continues to provide a guiding frame for French decision-makers until present. At the heart of this policy lies the idea of projecting 'political, economic, and cultural influence beyond the national territory' (Charillon 2002, 916–17). The belief in the universalism of its values, and by extension its foreign policy-making has made France a particularly active actor as well as vigorous democracy and human rights promoter on the global stage. According to Charillon (2011, 10–15), foreign policy in the Fifth Republic can best be described as a composition of emanation, resistance, and reinvention of French power.<sup>12</sup> With resistance Charillon refers to France's constant striving to provide alternative interpretations of an international system, which French policy-makers have considered as being overly dominated by Anglo-Saxon political and ideological traditions. Balme (2009, 138–39) also proposes a tripartite definition of French foreign policy. Like Charillon, he stresses the 'search for leadership in international relations based on a policy of strict independence'. The 'reinvention of French power' finds its equivalent in Balme's notion of 'diplomacy of movement', which constantly adapts to an altering operational environment.

De Gaulle's empty chair policy in Europe, the French withdrawal from NATO's integrated military command structure in 1966,<sup>13</sup> the *Hexagone's* special relationship with the developing world and in particular its former colonies, the balancing act between the two Cold War blocs, or Chirac's refusal to back the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 are all part of a series of events that have generated the

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<sup>12</sup> The French word *rayonnement* (emanation) refers to a country's capability to exercise influence beyond its borders, employing both hard and soft power means. It is in that sense synonymous to projection.

<sup>13</sup> France re-joined NATO in 2009 under the Sarkozy presidency.

impression of France being a reluctant ally in the Western liberal-democratic camp. Frachon succinctly summarises the Fifth Republic's infamous reputation among its allies when describing France as 'the exceptionally anti-American member in the Western camp that pretends—notwithstanding its limited resources—to have an exceptional global influence' (Frachon 2002).<sup>14</sup> The impression of a 'certain idea of France' (Cerny 1980, 3; Gordon 1993) and the claim for exceptionalism, propagated by de Gaulle and kept alive under the General's successors, have contributed to the fact that France is often considered as the typical outsider, if we are to speak with the vocabulary of comparative politics. This role conception has been reinforced by the fact that French decision-makers tend to have 'a greater sense of the past than [decision-makers in many] other states and a self-conscious awareness of being different' (Keiger 2005, 139). From an analytical point of view, this particular role made that the French case rarely informed more general models or theories of foreign policy analysis (Appleton 2009, 1–2). Vice versa, methods and tools of foreign policy analysis or theories of international relations were seldom applied to understand the special relationship between France and Africa, which better resembled 'the world of domestic politics than that of formal inter-state relations' (Clapham 1996, 89).

French resistance to Western conformism has been explained with reference to the country's prestige politics, which comes along with the idea of *rayonnement* (emanation). French actors perceive their country first and foremost as a value-promoting entity that has to fulfil a special role and extraordinary responsibilities in Europe and in the world. The importance French policy-makers attribute to reputational factors such as honour and standing in the international system are incarnated in the notion of *grandeur*. This normative concept was first employed to describe the 'embodiment of General de Gaulle's hopes and aspirations for his beloved France' (Cerny 1980, 3). Grandeur also implies a sense of prowess that invites the individual to subordinate his/her own actions to higher principles and the common good. This subordination to higher principles attributed to the state gave rise to the idea of *service public* and more importantly in the context of the present study explains the merging of

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<sup>14</sup> 'Membre exceptionnellement anti-américain du camp occidental, prétendant, en dépit de moyens limités, disposer d'une influence exceptionnelle mondiale'. Since France's rapprochement with the US under Sarkozy this claim has lost some of its validity. The Hollande administration maintains close transatlantic relations, notably in the realm of security policy in Africa. France and the US collaborate closely in matters of counter-terrorism in the Sahel.

individual and collective identities.<sup>15</sup>

Although grandeur has been cited as one of the principal driving forces of post-WWII French foreign policy-making, as an analytical tool the notion is useful only to some limited extent. Grandeur can have multiple meanings and can be interpreted in various ways according to the specific context and the actors in place. For de Gaulle, it was more about an attitude than an actual policy (Hoffmann 1960, 145). Rigidity, as de Gaulle observed, is greatness's worst enemy (1960, 145). Employing grandeur as a stable independent variable distorts the concept's meaning and does a poor job in explaining actual foreign policy-making. As Stanley Hoffman puts it, 'grandeur is an imperative with a varying content' (Hoffmann 1960, 145). To illustrate this point, a parallel can be drawn between a static version of grandeur and the assumption of fixed national identities. Whilst giving the impression of being comprehensive explanatory variables they are in fact 'incapable of explaining why the social actors involved act in a certain way' (Wodak et al. 2009, 11). Such universal and static concepts force meaning upon discourses and practices rather than extracting it. A more inductive approach considers discourses and practices as constituting elements of social reality. Accordingly, the concepts used to describe a given social reality emerge from the discursive production of knowledge and are not defined a priori.<sup>16</sup>

Grandeur as a concept can only be saved if it is understood as an amendable and flexible frame that gives rise to more concrete and context-specific policy ideas and eventually actions, which both can be traced in day-to-day policy-making. To bring these policy ideas to the forefront, the present study privileges the notion of *puissance d'influence*. It incorporates all meanings of the notion of grandeur whilst at the same time being more specific and empirically relevant. Most importantly, however, the label *puissance d'influence* is part of today's parlance of French foreign policy-makers; as opposed to the concept of grandeur, which has almost entirely disappeared from the French political discourse, being considered a relic from the colonial and neo-colonial past. The notion of *puissance d'influence* comes without preconceived ideas of neo-colonialism and therefore has become a widely used *élément*

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<sup>15</sup> The notion of *service public* exceeds the English equivalent of civil service. A strong devotion to the state and the sense of contributing to some greater good are two core characteristics of this concept, <http://www.vie-publique.fr/decouverte-institutions/institutions/approfondissements/notion-service-public.html>, accessed on 22 November 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Grandeur initially emerged from the French political discourse. However, it has lost its appeal over time and has not been renewed anymore, turning it into a static concept.

*de langage* (element of speech) of the French political discourse. According to Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, there are eight characteristics that make France an influential power in the world (Fabius 2012i):

1. Its permanent membership in the UN Security Council
2. Its status as a nuclear power
3. Its status as the world's fifth largest economy
4. 200 million French speakers in the world and an estimated 700 million by 2050 (mainly Africans)
5. Cultural *rayonnement*
6. The positive perception of France across the globe
7. The defence of a certain conception of human rights
8. The country's history

France's permanent seat in the Security Council, the importance of Africa as part of France's political, linguistic and cultural sphere of influence, the positive perception of France across the globe, the role conception of France as being a human rights promoter, as well as the country's history in Africa influenced the actors' mental maps particularly during the decision-making processes that led to the two military interventions in Mali and the CAR.

## 1.2 The Development of French Policy-Making in Africa: Continuity and Change

It is widely acknowledged that the *de jure* independence of France's colonies in the 1960s did not constitute a clear rupture with the colonial past, 'but rather a restructuring of the imperial relationship' (Chafer 2001, 167; Gregory 2000, 435–36). Following independence, a hierarchical order and the subordination of the so-called Third World states remained the determining characteristic of North–South relations and created 'a major chasm between their [the former colonies'] formal sovereignty and their effective sovereignty' (Barnett and Sikkink 2008, 66). Relying on highly personalised links between French and African political and business elites, bilateral defence agreements containing secret clauses for intervention, technical and cultural cooperation, as well as paternalistic discourses that were centred around the concept of a shared identity and family metaphors (Brysk, Parsons, and Sandholtz 2002; Chafer 2001, 177), France continued to exert strong influence on politics in large parts of sub-Saharan Africa—including former Belgian and Portuguese colonial territories (Gounin 2009, 161)—

for more than three decades after the African independences had occurred (Chipman 1989; Chafer 2001; Gouttebrune 2002). According to Gregory (2000, 435–36), ‘France exercised a “virtual empire” in sub-Saharan Africa, premised on cultural, economic, linguistic and personal ties forged during the colonial period and, somewhat less plausibly, on “geographic proximity”’. This neo-colonial exercise of power soon became subject to critical analyses both from academics and advocacy groups (Golan 1981; Chipman 1989; Verschave 1998). Adebajo summarises the principal allegations that have been voiced against France’s traditional approach towards Africa as follows:

Turning to France’s role in West Africa, and Africa in general, this role has historically been one of neo-colonial domination, with the Gallic nation tying the currencies of its former colonies (the CFA franc) to the French franc, exercising political control over local puppets, receiving political campaign funds from assorted despots, and establishing permanent military bases in Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal from which interventions were launched. Having intervened militarily over thirty times and changed countless regimes in Africa during the Cold War, France’s opposition to America’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 appears ironic and hypocritical. The idea of France as a defender of the sovereign rights of states seems about as plausible as a pyromaniac fireman condemning the acts of a deranged arsonist. (Adebajo 2004)

While the underlying purpose(s) and motivations of France’s approach towards its former colonies are still subject to much debate, there is little doubt that the enterprise of maintaining a zone of special influence only became possible because France could rely on African elites who themselves had a vehement interest in the relationship and therefore exchanged favours with their counterparts in Paris (Bayart 2000; Bayart 2006). The tip of the iceberg consisted of the infamous *Françafrique* networks, which brought together small groups of French and African elites, blurring the distinction between private and public interests.<sup>17</sup> Paternalistic policies and personalised ties allowed France to exert direct influence over a region much larger than the territory confined within its own national borders and to elevate its own status to that of an alleged Great Power. Against this backdrop, it is no surprise that France’s relations with the African continent for a long time had not been considered as belonging to the realm of French foreign policy, but as a distinct policy (Châtaigner 2006). The traditional

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<sup>17</sup> The notion *France-Afrique*, which originally was coined by Félix Houphouët-Boigny in order to describe the close relationship between France and its colonies, was later given a different meaning by the activist and founding member of the French NGO *Survie* François-Xavier Verschave (1998). Verschave changed the diction of the term in *Françafrique* and used it to denounce the clientelistic dimension of France’s Africa policy and the high degree of corruption that accompanied Franco-African relations. Today, both meanings are often used interchangeably, in particular by the press, creating much confusion around the concept. In this work, I speak of French African relations or Franco-African relations and only use the term *Françafrique* when referring to the criminal aspects of the relationship.

differentiation between French foreign policy and French African policy is due to the fact that ‘Africa is experienced in French representations as a natural extension [of the *métropole*] where the Francophone world and Francophilia merge’ (Bourmaud 2000), bringing about the notion of ‘the so-called Franco-African state’ (Dozon 2002). Moreover, France represented the ideal-type of rational power-seeking actor and its elites helped to reinforce this image. France’s policy-making in Africa was interpreted as a means to strengthen the country’s position relative to other powers in the international system. Africa, in other words, became the centrepiece of an international architecture that gave the impression of French grandeur (Cerny 1980). Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, for instance, argued, ‘I am dealing with African affairs, namely with France’s interests in Africa’ (quoted in Martin 1995, 66), which he described as the ultimate objective of any French action in Africa. In light of such discourses and the accompanying practices, French policy-making in Africa became an excellent example of an interest-driven policy and an easy case for realists (Griffin 2007). Works that according to common practice can be summarised under the realist paradigm tend to attribute French activism in the sub-Saharan African region to France’s geostrategic interests, its ambition for power, and its aspiration to maintain a sphere of influence (Bourmaud 1995; Orban 2011).<sup>18</sup> Few authors questioned the notion of interest at all or provided a definition of what France’s interests could be beyond the materialist/post-colonial narrative (Olsen 2009).

While continuity defined France’s relationship with its former colonies for three decades, the post-1990s era increasingly put pressure on French policy-makers to normalise this cosy rapport with its African sphere of influence (Cumming and Langford 2005, 2). In particular, the triumphing neo-liberalisation of the international system after the end of the Cold War,<sup>19</sup> France’s dubious involvement in the Rwandan civil war and ensuing genocide in 1994 (Krosiak 2007; Pascallon 2004, 29), as well as

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<sup>18</sup> For the sake of convenience, I keep the various “isms” to categorise the different works under review but am aware of the limits of such categorisations. See Bourdieu’s (1988, 779) critique of the ill-fated division of disciplines into theoretical denominations, in which he states: ‘I am at loss to understand how social scientists can indulge in this typically archaic form of classificatory thinking, which has every characteristic of the practical logic at work in primitive societies (with the founding fathers acting as mythical ancestors), and is essentially oriented toward the accumulation of symbolic capital in the course of struggles to achieve scientific credibility and to discredit one’s opponent’ (see also 1987, 47–48). Elsewhere, Bourdieu (1987, 39) maintains that categorical academic thought prohibits intellectual invention, impeding the transgression of faux divisions.

<sup>19</sup> The end of the Cold War itself was not the catalyst of reform (d’Albis 1998, 3).



the gradual replacement of the old political generation (*les Anciens*) and the advocacy work by pressure groups condemning the *Françafrique* system (Verschave 1998), are all said to have transformed France's relations with sub-Saharan Africa (Chafer 2002, 347–49; Médard 2005; Bakong 2012). Adding to this, in the view of some authors, France's decision to intensify its commitment to the European integration project since the end of the 1980s had been the definitive but often disavowed step towards an incremental disengagement from the African continent in favour of closer relations with Europe's industrialised and Asia's emerging economies (Bayart 1990, 50).<sup>20</sup>

Though *rupture* had become the leitmotiv to describe changes in France's policy towards Africa since the early 1990s, it was only in 1997—the beginning of a period of *cohabitation* in French national politics—that true changes in France's African policy occurred. Step by step, the government under Lionel Jospin institutionalised the proclaimed rupture with the past. On the occasion of his first Africa tour as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hubert Védrine laid out the basic points of the renewed French African policy. Most importantly the Jospin government advocated a more holistic approach, considering the entire African continent and not only the francophone *pré carré*. In addition, the government applied itself to divest the old *Françafrique* networks and to transfer the principal responsibility of African affairs to the *Quai d'Orsay*. In this context, the absorption of the Ministry of Cooperation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1999—against the vehement protest of most of the francophone African heads of states—is particularly noteworthy. The Ministry's highly symbolic character represented the continuity of France's special relationship with a small number of African states and guaranteed the leaders of these states direct access to the French president.<sup>21</sup> In addition to

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<sup>20</sup> In 1983 François Mitterrand decided to keep France in the European monetary system. As shall be seen below, equating European integration with French disengagement from Africa represents only half of the truth. France has emerged as the principal advocate of the African continent within the European Union, thus allowing for African issues to be put on the European agenda. This is particularly true in the realm of security and defence policy. As Charbonneau highlights, 'The French role is absolutely central to an understanding of the EU's role in Africa. Without French political leadership and troop commitments, it seems very likely that these missions [Artemis DRC in 2003, EUFOR RD Congo in 2006, EUFOR Chad/CAR in 2008] would not have taken place' (Charbonneau 2009, 552).

<sup>21</sup> The Ministry of Cooperation was a colonial relic. It had directly emerged from the Ministry of Overseas France, formerly known as the Ministry of Colonies, and became soon a ministry exclusively dealing with francophone Black Africa (Gouttebrune 2002, 1035). Until today, the debate over the necessity and legitimacy of a Ministry of Cooperation continues. In 2013, Senators Jeanny Lorgeoux and Jean-Marie Bockel claim the reintroduction of a Ministry of International Cooperation (*Ministère de la Coopération Internationale*) that would combine the tasks that are presently divided between the Ministry of Economics and Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Sénat 2013, 401–4).

these institutional reforms, a more multilateral approach towards Africa developed (Adjovi 2002, 431–37). The latter involved, in particular, the UN as well as the EU and its member states and transferred more responsibility to African countries themselves, via a stronger dialogue with regional organisation, namely the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), as well as through the establishment of the *Renforcement des Capacités Africaines de Maintien de la Paix* (RECAMP) programme in 1998, an initiative to form and financially support African peacekeeping forces (Bagayoko-Penone 2003, 198–99). Multilateralism, as Chasles (2011) argues, ‘offered the advantage not only of answering criticisms and questions that had been raised but also presented the opportunity to provide a new legitimacy and new methods to French African policy’. Another noteworthy episode was Nicolas Sarkozy’s decision to abolish the notorious *cellule africaine* at the Élysée. This office, which was famous for its parallel diplomacy, became integrated into the general foreign policy framework and was from then on accountable to the president’s diplomatic advisor.<sup>22</sup>

With Africa redefining its position in the international system, French policy-making in sub-Saharan Africa has been gradually integrated into the general framework of French foreign policy (Cumming 1996; Marchal 1998). This partial dissolution of the thus far isolated Franco-African complex has often been associated with a move towards pragmatism and multilateralism, and an opening up of the once colonial sphere (Barrios 2010). This normalisation process also allowed for the relationship to be analysed with the same analytical tools as any other foreign policy (Bourmaud 2011, 42). The majority of studies concerned with French foreign policy in general, and French policy-making in Africa in particular, scrutinise the degree of continuity or change that defines a given policy and ask whether it confirms the infamous ‘French exception’ (Thiam 2008; Cole, Meunier, and Tiberj 2013; Howorth 2013, 250). Regarding French policy-making in Africa since the 1990s, most experts acknowledge the co-existence of both elements of continuity and elements of change (Médard 1982; Martin 1995; Huliaras 2002; Krosiak 2004; Le Gouriellec 2011; Cumming 2013; Howorth 2013, 262–64) and highlight the ongoing struggles between modernisers and traditionalists (*les Anciens et les Modernes*)

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<sup>22</sup> Sarkozy, however, continued to listen to special advisor Robert Bourgi, the metaphorical heir (*l’héritier spirituel*) of Jacques Foccart, who during his lifetime had been the puppeteer of the *Françafrique* system since de Gaulle and the living incarnation of France’s neo-colonial practices in Africa (Foccart and Gaillard 1995; Gregory 2000, 436–37; Bat 2012).

within the French state (Bourmaud 1996; Hugon 2005; Gounin 2009).

From this common ground, different, subtly nuanced interpretations have emerged, which understand France's altering policy towards Africa respectively as a process of incremental adaptation (Chafer 2002), disengagement/normalisation (Glaser and Smith 2005; Médard 2005, 38–39), or as a state of confusion (Chafer 2008; Bovcon 2012; 2013; Cumming 2013).<sup>23</sup> Apart from some few exceptions (Charbonneau 2008a)<sup>24</sup> it has become a widely held belief, regardless of the respective interpretation that individual works suggest, that the traditional French–African relationship is liable to some sort of decline. This decline is noticed both with respect to French interests in Africa (Bourmaud 2000) and with respect to French capabilities to influence outcomes on the African continent (Châtaigner 2006). The increased presence of emerging countries on the African continent has been perceived as the principal challenge to the traditional relations that threatens to undermine France's influence in the region.<sup>25</sup>

Two points are worth emphasising here. First, the most common framework of reference against which French–African relations are put into perspective continues to be the pre-1990s period. Retaining France's past position in Africa as point of reference allows analysts to trace patterns of continuity and change (Martin 1995; Hugon 2010) and to contextualise French African relations over the *longue durée*. It provides the reader with the big picture and a clear storyline but it also biases analyses towards the chosen point of reference, which—in this case—is the colonial/post-colonial era. The second point relates to the uncritical use of the notion of decline. Most works do not define the notion itself. Implicitly, of course, it is understood as the deviation from the status quo of the colonial and post-colonial past. However, this deviation is mostly measured in material terms at the expense of alternative explanations (for instance Schmidt 2013, 165–92). The notion of decline is less suited to explain actual

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<sup>23</sup> For this tripartite division of the literature see Bovcon (2013, 12).

<sup>24</sup> In his work on French military involvement in Africa, Charbonneau (2006; 2008a; 2008b) insists that the past two decades of transformation are rather a sign of restructuration than of decline. Charbonneau (2009, 558) considers the Europeanisation of the military domain as a reinforcement of 'outdated values, practices and structures of a particular kind of knowledge, that of French security policy in Africa'.

<sup>25</sup> The 2007-2008 financial crisis, the ensuing sovereign-debt crisis in Europe, France's slow to negative economic growth (stagnation in the second half of 2014), rising unemployment, a largely unsatisfied public, which does not hesitate to give their votes to parties situated on the very margins of the political spectrum as a means to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the elites in place, further reinforced the sentiment of decline among French decision-makers.

foreign policy behaviour. As indicated above, neither colonial grandeur nor its decline understood as static explanatory variables can provide compelling explanations as for why the Hollande administration decided to intervene first in Mali and then in the CAR. Of course, these concepts played into the actors' larger belief systems most notably insofar as they functioned as antipodes to the present behaviour; however only once these belief systems confront new situations that ask for political decisions they are translated into concrete policy ideas, the identification of which provide more precise insights into the decision-makers' minds.

The normalisation of the Franco-African relationship was accompanied by an increased marginalisation of African issues on the French and European political agendas in between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s (Bayart 2004).<sup>26</sup> This political and economic marginalisation of the African continent simultaneously provoked a decreasing interest on the part of the scientific community. An ever smaller number of researchers attended to the French-African relationship, be it for the lack of perceived pertinence, or be it (and this is particularly true for the French academic community) out of caution to avoid a topic that continues to be regarded as sensitive.<sup>27</sup> Such disinterest did not help to overcome another weakness of the literature on France's policy-making in Africa. As Bourmaud points out, 'analyses of France's Africa policy very rarely explain their epistemological categories and their theoretical bases' (Bourmaud 2011, 41). Bourmaud is not the only one to contemplate the descriptive nature and the lack of theoretical groundwork in studies on French policy in Africa.

More recently, this trend of declining interest in Africa has begun to be reversed thanks to Africa's strategic and economic re-emergence on the international scene (Engel and Olsen 2005, 2). Given the attention that the African continent has received from other actors in the international system, the idea of an *African Renaissance*<sup>28</sup> finds more and more acceptance within the discipline of international relations (IR). An increasing number of studies attempt to understand the international competition over African resources and markets (Taylor and Williams 2004; Engel and Olsen 2005). Referring to the colonial scramble, which hit its peak at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the partition of the entire African

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<sup>26</sup> The gradual economic marginalisation of Africa and in particular of francophone Africa had begun in the 1970s under the Presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (Bach and Smouts 1982, 5–6)

<sup>27</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014.

<sup>28</sup> This notion goes back to Vale and Maseko (1998).

continent along borders brokered between a handful of European colonial powers, some scholars see a ‘new scramble for Africa’ emerging (Carmody 2011). However, this ‘new scramble’ differs in at least two regards from its colonial predecessor. First, the pool of actors has widened and Europeans are no longer the dominant outside actors when it comes to economic relations with the African continent. China has emerged as one of the most active players in Africa (Alden 2007; Ampiah and Naidu 2008). Second, while Africans had no say in the colonial carving up of their continent one hundred years ago, African elites today are key players with considerable bargaining leverage, not least due to the increasing competition that has risen over the continent’s raw materials, markets, and lands (Ellis 2012, 68).

In light of this renewed interest in Africa, an increasing number of scholars have returned to the dynamics of French policy-making in Africa and by so doing begun to adapt this body of literature to the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s operational environment. Banégas, Marchal, and Meimon (2007) in a special issue of *Politique Africaine* called upon the academic community to revive the debate on France’s relations with the African continent. Since then, some serious efforts have been undertaken to structure the rich empirical material with the help of social theories (Chafer and Cumming 2011b; Bovcon 2013). Purely thick-descriptions of earlier generations of scholars have been replaced by contributions that subject empirical data to methodological and theoretical rigorousness. Chafer and Cumming (2011a; 2011b), working on Anglo-French bi- and multilateral cooperation in Africa, respectively, resort to neo-classical realism to explain policy-makers’ motivations and rationales. Other works address French security and development policies from a constructivist perspective and extend the analytical scope by including a European dimension (Irondele 2009; Balleix 2010; Sicurelli 2010). Still others propose institutionalist explanations of France’s continuous military engagement in its former *pré carré* focusing on the importance of path-dependency and the longevity of once established regimes (Bovcon 2012; 2013). In particular, crises situations and the military dimension of the relationship have gained the attention of a younger generation of scholars (Bagayoko-Penone 2003; Gnangueon 2011; Bovcon 2012; Bovcon 2013; Koepf 2013a; Koepf 2013b).

Common to most existing studies is a focus on outcomes rather than on processes only allowing for a posteriori interpretations, which risk to either confound results with goals or to ignore the latter at all

(Aron 1981, 97–98; Irondelle 2011, 20; for an exception see Koepf 2013b, 29). Bovcon’s work for instance, due to the inherent path-dependency in the regime-theoretical/historical-institutionalist framework the author applies, cannot fully live up to its aim of providing ‘a dynamic model of the interaction between structure and agents’ (Bovcon 2013, 7). More precisely, she underestimates the extent to which the behaviour of actors—indeed, the actors themselves—may change over time. The underlying motivations that incite state actors to prefer one option over another—which may be fundamentally different from the eventual outcome—can only be discerned by engaging with the process itself and by producing an analytical framework that replicates the situation of the moment when a decision is taken; to the extent to which this is procurable with the limited tools social sciences and history offer (Cohen 1986, 9–11; Aron 1981). Only by looking at what actors *intend* to achieve, can underlying interests and preferences be extracted. Once it is known how French actors define their roles and their expectations towards sub-Saharan Africa, it becomes possible to create an alternative framework of reference against which French policy in Africa can be evaluated. Such a framework would depend more on the actual preferences, belief systems, interests, capacities, and the international context<sup>29</sup> in which a country is situated at the time of a given decision than on a distant point in the past.<sup>30</sup> It is hence both actor-specific and context-sensitive. Former French Foreign Minister Michel Jobert argued in the preface to the French translation of Cerny’s seminal work, *The Politics of Grandeur*, that one thing de Gaulle ‘has taught us, or revealed to us, is that the attitude with which one affronts a difficulty has more importance than the result’ (quoted in Cerny 1986, 8). It is this attitude and the related motivations, perceptions, and beliefs of French elites that are at the heart of the present study.

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<sup>29</sup> For the importance of the international context, see Chafer (2001, 179).

<sup>30</sup> I am not ignoring the important impact the past has on present decision-making (George and Bennett 2005, 8; see also Jervis 1976, Chapter 6). On the contrary, I acknowledge its importance towards the shaping of ideas and perceptions. I only claim that it is not the only, and arguably not even the most important starting point from which to begin a foreign policy analysis. In this sense, rather than a non-use, a different use of history is advocated.

### 1.3 Security for Africa: A Multilateral Affair?

In no other policy realm has the transition from a traditional to a renewed approach to Africa become more evident than in defence and security policy. The period of normalisation has led to a fundamental reconfiguration of France's defence apparatus on the African continent. Next to the reduction of the troops permanently stationed in French bases across the continent, France bid farewell to the concept of unilateral interventionism in the name of regime stability (Koepf 2013b). Consequently, over the last two decades French military operations in sub-Saharan Africa have shifted away from opaque solo-operations towards a new paradigm, that is, 'the participation in multinational humanitarian and peacekeeping operations on behalf of the world community' (Treacher 2003, 2). France has dedicated considerable financial and political means to the establishment of an African stand-by force that would be able to be deployed across the entire continent and on short notice (Melly and Darracq 2013, 13). *African solutions to African security problems* is the catch-phrase the Hollande administration employs to describe this renewed approach towards Africa in matters of security. However, France's most recent interventions in Mali and the CAR also show that this capacity building process won't be completed in the near future and that the *gendarme d'Afrique* remains a committed security actor in the region. Present French security policy towards Africa oscillates between traditional solutions to crisis management and a modernised multilateral approach promoting African ownership.

Traditionally, France's military apparatus used to be high profile and expensive, as were French interventions. Despite continuous budget cuts over the past two decades that reduced France's military expenditure to 2.2 per cent of its GDP in 2013 (compared to 3.9 per cent in 1988) (World Bank 2014),<sup>31</sup> the capacity to intervene beyond its territory continues to be considered among the principal tools of France's foreign policy. The importance French policy-makers attribute to their country's military capacities and their interpretation of warfare as an ultimate diplomatic tool reflect a Clausewitzian understanding of the military domain. As Maulny (2010, 109) stresses, 'defence policy, as an instrument of diplomacy, gives evidence of the vision we have of the place of our country on the international

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<sup>31</sup> In 2014, France spent €31.4 billion on defence and allocated €450 million to military interventions. Due to the ongoing operations in the Sahara-Sahel and the CAR this latter budget had been surpassed by €605 million (Le Drian 2014).

stage'. Hollande reaffirmed this dominant thought of France's strategic culture when saying, '...there is no great nation in this world that is not endowed with a defence apparatus' (Hollande 2014g).<sup>32</sup> Until today, French security culture cherishes the 'sacrosanct principle of autonomous decision-making and independent defence capabilities' (Irondele and Besancenot 2010, 22).

Following their nominal independence, almost all former French colonies in sub-Saharan Africa agreed with France to cooperate in military matters in one way or another. With the exception of Guinea, also all former colonies concluded so-called *accords de cooperation* (military cooperation agreements) with France (Luckham 1982, 99; Bakong 2012, 192).<sup>33</sup> The essence of these cooperation agreements consisted of what was termed "technical assistance" and implied that France would provide the newly established African armies with military equipment and assist in the formation of military personnel by placing French instructors at their former colonies' disposal. In exchange for these services, the African states asserted that they would continue to resort to French expertise concerning the maintenance and the instauration of the material (Bakong 2012, 193). In addition to the *accords de cooperation*, France concluded defence agreements (*accords de défense*) with eight of its former colonies.<sup>34</sup> Defence agreements were more extensive than military cooperation agreements 'effectively transferring responsibility for African states' external (and in most cases internal) security to Paris, and allowing France military basing rights' (Utley 2005, 26). The agreements allowed France to intervene in support of those African governments that were well-disposed to the *métropole* but threatened by internal political instability or external threats. Whilst obliging France to guarantee the stability of the signatories, the treaties also gave France the necessary discretion and legitimacy to intervene in what were now *de jure* independent and sovereign states and thus contributed to a prolongation of the colonial hierarchy of the international system (Gregory 2000, 435). No other former colonial power intervened

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<sup>32</sup> 'C'est cette conjugaison d'équipements de qualité, d'hommes et de femmes de haut niveau technique et également une stratégie et une doctrine, appuyées par les moyens budgétaires qui sont accordés à la Défense ; c'est toute cette conjugaison qui nous permet d'être un grand pays. **Il n'y a pas de grand pays au monde qui ne soit doté d'un outil de défense.**'

<sup>33</sup> CAR (13 August 1960), Gabon (17 August 1960), Congo (1 January 1974), Cameroon (21 February 1974), Senegal (29 March 1974), Benin (27 February 1975), Chad (6 March 1976), Togo (23 March 1976), Mauritania (2 September 1976), Niger (19 February 1977), Djibouti (27 June 1977), and Mali (14 October 1977). In the mid-1970s, the three former Belgian colonies Zaire, Rwanda, and Burundi also signed military cooperation agreements with France.

<sup>34</sup> Cameroon, Central African Republic, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Gabon, Senegal, and Togo.



more frequently and to the same extent in its former dependencies than France (Schmidt 2013, 176). With an average of one military intervention per year until the mid-1990s (Chafer 2005, 10), security aspects became so integral that many observers placed them at the core of the French-African relationship (Utley 2005; Charbonneau 2008a; Foutoyet 2009, 93).

Despite this extraordinary continuity at first sight, France's defence policy in general and its military activity on the African continent in particular have been subjected to fundamental changes since the mid-nineties (Gregory 2000). Similar to France's foreign policy, several factors such as the end of the Cold War, the emergence of a new generation of French leaders, a dwindling belief in the cost utility benefit of the *pré carré*, increasing budget constraints emerging from France's participation in the European Monetary Union (EMU), France's contested role in the Rwandan genocide, the internationally denounced backing of Zaire's (DRC) Mobutu, and the disclosure of several other scandals related to the *Françafrique* networks such as the so-called *Angolagate* (Juilliard 2009) made reform necessary (Tull 2005, 2; Utley 2005, 29–30).

In an attempt to normalise its post-colonial security architecture, France scaled back its military presence in the region, a decision which, however, as French policy-makers continued to emphasise, did 'not signify a disengagement from Africa' (Berman 2002, 3). Whilst not entirely disengaging from the African continent, French governments nevertheless curtailed the most visible elements of their country's presence in the region by reducing the total number of standing forces and avoiding unilateral military interventions in African conflicts (Olsen 2009, 250).<sup>35</sup> At the same time, French governments became increasingly committed to a more multilateral approach in defence and security matters. Indeed,

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<sup>35</sup> In the 1960s 58,000 troops were permanently stationed in Africa. As of January 2014, 3,290 so-called *forces de présence* remained on the African continent (2,000 in Djibouti, 940 in Gabon, and 350 in Senegal). In addition 6,545 soldiers remained deployed in Africa as part of ongoing military operations (out of a total of 8,300 French soldiers across the world). 3,085 soldiers were deployed to the Sahel-Sahara, 2,260 to the CAR, 810 to West Africa, and 270 in the Indian Ocean (as of 23 October 2014). <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/ema/forces-prepositionnees>, <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations>, accessed on 23 November 2014. While the reduction of troops between the 1960s and the 1980s was considerable (15,000 permanent forces by the late 1980s), France's military presence on the continent remained rather stable during the 1990s, despite proclamations to the contrary. In fact, as Charbonneau (2008b, 79) points out, 'exact numbers of French soldiers in Africa is always difficult to determine; the number is usually much higher because of various military operations and exercises that demand other forces'. Taken together, the numbers of permanently stationed French forces and those involved in specific operations has continuously averaged out at around 10,000 forces. As of 2014, 11,775 troops were operating on the African continent (5,050 permanent forces; 6,725 deployed in ongoing operations) (Chapleau 2014b; <http://www.defense.gouv.fr>).

Africanisation of regional security and multilateralism had become the new doctrine of French security policy (Gregory 2000, 442). The *loi de programmation militaire 1997-2002* induced the transfer of responsibility to African troops through RECAMP, the creation of military schools, the so-called *Écoles Nationales à Vocation Régionale* (ENVR; National Schools with Regional Vocation) and the quest, together with Great Britain in 1998, for a more credible European military capacity (St. Malo Declaration), which preceded the more active involvement in missions to Africa under the auspice of UN or EU mandates. Some authors argue that France multilateralises its military commitments for the purpose of legitimacy as well as to reduce costs and risks (Krosiak 2004, 76; Livre Blanc 2008, 81–98).<sup>36</sup> For Charbonneau (2008a, 293) ‘the *gendarme* has simply put on a cloak of multilateral [and preferably European] humanitarianism’. With regard to the above mentioned troop reduction, this argument can be further supported by the fact that the ‘quantitative loss of troops was replaced by a qualitative gain in projection forces’ (Charbonneau 2008a, 282), mainly through a process of professionalization of the French army.

Multilaterlisation in the view of French actors did not imply a loss of sovereignty, autonomy, and leadership. The European Union Force (EUFOR) Chad in 2008 was a prime example of an EU operation under French leadership. France not only bore a large amount of the costs and provided the majority of soldiers and equipment but also was able to frame a policy that developed at the domestic level as an expression of a common European consensus (Bono 2011, 39–40). Subsequently, France has become the biggest advocate of a common European defence policy, which leads several authors to conclude that French defence policy is trapped between two conflicting goals: multilateralism and independence (Meunier 2008, 243). The extent to which these two apparently contradictory policy orientations influenced the decision-making processes during the crises in the CAR and Mali, will be further elaborated in Chapters Four and Five. However, previous interventions and peacekeeping operations in Côte d’Ivoire in 2002, in the DRC in 2006, as well as in Chad and the CAR in 2008 suggest that French elites still prefer a form of multilateralism that relies on a ‘statutory hierarchy of states’ and that grants

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<sup>36</sup> Olsen (2009:8) makes this claim with reference to the 2006 EUFOR mission to Congo, which would have been unthinkable under a French flag due to France’s involvement in the region in the early 1990s, notably the role it played during the genocide in Rwanda.

them a non-negligible degree of autonomy and independence in the conduct of a given operation (Irondele and Besancenot 2010, 24–25). Another significant break in France’s traditional security policy towards Africa occurred in 2008, when President Sarkozy, against the opposition of most francophone African leaders who cherished the merits of these traditional *life insurances*, initiated a general revision of all existing defence treaties. By consequence, neither the intervention in Mali (which never signed a defence agreement with France) nor the peacekeeping operation in the CAR were justified on the basis of any bi-lateral defence agreement.<sup>37</sup>

The belief that a durable and stable peace in Africa would require African ownership gained prominence in the wake of the genocide in Rwanda. One month after the launching of Operation Turquoise in June 1994, former French Prime Minister Édouard Balladur urged in front of the Senegalese Parliament that one should ‘examine the establishment of an African structure that is able to intervene rapidly on the African continent [in the course of] peace keeping operations’ (quoted in Bakong 2012, 206). Yet, it needed another crisis in the Great Lake region, before the creation of RECAMP was announced by Jacques Chirac at the French-African summit in Louvre in 1998 (Bakong 2012, 207). Under the Hollande administration, African ownership of the continent’s security became the absolute priority both in discourse and practice. In particular, the slogan *African solutions to African security problems* did not only dominate France’s political discourse but gave rise to concrete policy measures.<sup>38</sup> The Élysée Summit on Peace and Security in Africa in December 2013 was held under this very same motto. Forty African heads of state came together with representatives from the UN and the EU to principally discuss the longstanding but still not realised idea of a permanent pan-African rapid reaction force that would be able to replace the French forces, which until present remain Africa’s sole rapid deployment force.<sup>39</sup> From Paris’s point of view, calling upon African leaders to ensure the continent’s security was an overdue and financially necessary move. Especially in light of a tightening

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<sup>37</sup> Mali, which had not concluded a defence agreement at the time of independence, signed a comprehensive military cooperation agreement that regulates the presence of French troops on Malian territory in the wake of Operation Serval on 16 July 2013 (Diarra 2013).

<sup>38</sup> The roots of the catchphrase *African solutions to African problems* date back to the 1970s. Giscard d’Estaing used the term widely. On the other side of the Atlantic the Carter administration employed the same phrase to describe their approach towards Africa (van de Walle 2009, 17).

<sup>39</sup> The African Standby Force was originally supposed to be operational by 2008 but until now exists mainly on paper (Weiss and Welz 2014, 900).

defence budget, France is no longer able to commit the resources required for maintaining a high-profile security presence in Africa. Operation Serval alone cost the French treasury an estimated €650 million in 2013. However, most of these political commitments cited above are neither particularly innovative nor have they exempted French troops from their traditional role of first interveners in conflicts in francophone Africa.<sup>40</sup> In crisis situations, ‘Paris is still seen as a key source of diplomatic, military and financial pressure on or support for the countries in the region’ (Melly and Darracq 2013, 3). In particular, during the crisis in Mali the interim government expressed ‘greater confidence in their former colonial master’s capabilities than in those of the AU or ECOWAS’ (Weiss and Welz 2014, 900). Likewise, former Central African President François Bozizé appealed first to France shortly before being ousted from office by the Seleka rebellion.

## 1.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief discussion of the characteristics of French foreign policy and reviewed France’s foreign and security policy-making in Africa since the former colonies’ independence. Whilst most authors agree that the relationship gradually shifted from the exceptional to the normal, continuous French interventions and the re-emergence of old patterns of behaviour suggest that such a linear reading may not be the most suited approach to understand present French foreign and security policy towards the African continent. The same can be said about the use of the notion of decline that overly biases explanations towards a distant past rather than juxtaposing them to the present operational environment. As I have argued above, these concepts, whilst allowing for situating the relationship on a timeline and providing an understanding of the historical legacy against the backdrop of which decision-making takes place, are less suited to incorporate the motivations that inform specific decisions. After three decades of ongoing debate, it is about time to go beyond the continuity-change nexus (Bach 1982; Cumming 2013) and to shed light on other facets of French foreign policy in sub-

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<sup>40</sup> For instance, the narrative of the security-development nexus, which dominates the present-day discourse and is advertised as a progressive approach to Africa’s security, was already evoked by Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in the 1970s (Dagut 1982, 24). Giscard d’Estaing referred to a nexus of ‘peace, independence, and development, which need to be assured by the Africans themselves’ (Dagut 1982, 24).

Saharan Africa. The chapter has also elaborated on the notion of *grandeur*, which until present remains the principal ideational variable used to describe French foreign policy in general and explain France's continuous presence on the African continent in particular (Cerny 1980; Vaisse 1998; Mesfin 2008). I have pointed out the limits of this concept—notably its vagueness, static nature, and colonial legacy—and suggested an inductive approach that distils policy ideas from the actual discourses and practices as an alternative method to explain French action in Africa. The last observation this chapter has made regards the overly attention scholars have paid to policy outcomes. Few studies have engaged with decision-making processes of French interventionism in Africa (Koepf 2013b; Notin 2014) and no study has done so using an ideational approach in the context of the two military operations under the Hollande administration.<sup>41</sup> By engaging with the ideas and belief systems that mattered during the decision-making processes of Operations Serval and Sangaris, this work seeks to fill some of the gaps in the existing literature and by so doing to contribute to this long-standing and fascinating debate on France's role on the African continent.

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<sup>41</sup> For a detailed and informative analysis of the decision-making processes (although not of the actors' underlying motivations and preferences) of EUFOR Chad/CAR and the role of France see Dijkstra (2010).

## Chapter Two

# Agents, Structure, and Ideas: A Conceptual Framework for Analysing French Decision-Making in sub-Saharan Africa

*Most politicians and journalists are like Monsieur Jourdain; they have half-formed and unarticulated theories of how the world works that they use to confront and make sense of new situations.*

— Richard Ned Lebow

*...the essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer—often, indeed, to the decider himself...There will always be the dark and tangled stretches in the decision-making process—mysterious even to those who may be most intimately involved...*

— John Fitzgerald Kennedy

*L'étude de la décision, que ce soit dans le champ de la sociologie des organisations, des politiques publiques ou celui de la Foreign Policy Analysis, constitue une entreprise de « désenchantement » qui conduit à une forme de dilution de la décision.*

— Bastien Irondelle

Attempts to understand and explain processes of decision-making are subject to a series of challenges. The present chapter introduces the theoretical and methodological tools that have been used in this study to enter the maze of foreign policy decision-making. More precisely, it explains the theoretical assumptions that inform this research, with a view to highlighting the benefits of employing an ideational framework for the analysis of foreign policy-making in general and decision-making processes in particular.

As shown in the preceding chapter, France's relations with the African continent have been explained and analysed from a variety of different angles. The different approaches make valuable contributions to our understanding of French policy-making in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet, since the majority of studies concentrate on situating a specific act of French policy-making within a larger

temporal frame in order to measure the degree of continuity and change, it is usually a series of outcomes—not the procedures themselves—that fall under researchers’ spotlights. The theoretical framework proposed here goes beyond this well-established analytical canon and intends to facilitate the task of unravelling the complex and oftentimes hidden dynamics of decision-making processes. To achieve this objective, a microfoundational reading of events is necessary to ‘probe the “why” questions underlying the events, conditions, and interaction patterns which rest upon state action’ (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962, 33). Such a microfoundational and process orientated approach puts actors or agents at the heart of the analysis. While embedded in their environment, actors dispose of a non-negligible degree of autonomy, which calls for a close analysis of their perceptions, motivations, and behaviour (Bourdieu 1985, 727). Actors co-constitute and reshape the system through their subjective interpretations of natural and social kinds (Wendt 1999, 68–71), their discourses, and eventually their actions (Crozier and Friedberg 1992 [1977], 44, 91; Bratberg 2011, 346). To be clear, the argument made here is not about discrediting notions of structure for the benefit of agency. Structural forces—that is, the operational environment—are constantly influencing the decision-making process, however, they only gain meaning in the minds of the actors (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962; H. Sprout and M. Sprout 1965; Allison 1971). Structure and agency are relational to each other and actors’ perceptions, discourses, and practices function as the node between the two dimensions. The purpose of engaging with those who make and shape foreign policy is to render the unobservable ontologies of structural approaches observable (Doty 1997, 368; 372). Concrete meaning shall be given to the metaphysical abstraction of the state, which out of convenience or tradition remains the most common level of analysis in the discipline of international relations (Waltz 1979; Wendt 1999).<sup>42</sup>

The theoretical framework proposed here can be described as a context sensitive, ideational foreign policy analysis,<sup>43</sup> which—in this case—is used to explain France’s security policy in sub-Saharan

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<sup>42</sup> For a critique of structuralist approaches and an argument in favour of decision-making approaches in international relations theory, see Hagan (2001).

<sup>43</sup> FPA, with its ‘focus on the foreign policy process as opposed to foreign policy outcomes’ (Alden and Aran 2012, 1) can fill the gap in the existing literature on French–African relations. FPA considers decision-making not just as a determined factor, but also as a determining factor, of international relations (Smith 1986, 14). The approach acknowledges that throughout the policy-making process actors are not only affected by the rules that surround them but also make, shape, and interpret these rules. Consequently, FPA treats decision-makers ‘as more than passive agent[s] in some preordained spectacle’ (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962, 113).

Africa, but which may be applied to other decision-making processes in world politics. In the course of the following discussion it will become evident that some of the current debates on decision-making processes raise the same or similar questions as early foreign policy analysts did more than fifty years ago (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962; Hudson 2002, 2–3). Accordingly, present-day political science can benefit by returning to seminal writings and anterior debates in the field.

The first section of this chapter highlights the interrelatedness of agency and structure. It then examines the benefits and challenges that emerge from locating one's work at the intersection of methodological holism and methodological individualism. The second section explores the decision-making process itself. This section, first, identifies the limits of rational choice accounts of decision-making. It then introduces the concepts of *mental maps* and *strategic culture* in order to propose a dialogue between cultural approaches (located at the societal level) and cognitive approaches, which focus on individuals. The next section deals with the questions of how threats are constructed and policy issues become securitised. It follows a short excursus on the methodology used to analyse the empirical data. The chapter concludes by synthesising the core assumptions and establishing a link between the theoretical framework and the subsequent empirical analysis.

## 2.1 The Agency–Structure Debate and This Project

Since the 1950s, foreign policy analysts have argued that structural forces only bear a meaning in the perceptions of actors. In their seminal volume *Foreign policy decision-making*, Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin (1962, 5) contend, 'it is difficult to see how we can account for specific actions and for continuities of policies without trying to discover how their *operating environments are perceived by those responsible for choices*' (emphasis added). The authors qualify this claim by stating that the 'selective discrimination of the setting may effectively limit action. Put simply: What the decision-makers "see" is what they act upon' (1962, 102–3). From early on, IR scholars were intrigued by the importance of ideational variables and their crucial role for the understanding of politics. However, with the publication of Waltz's powerful critique of reductionist theories—that is, theories that explain



‘systems by reducing them to their parts’ (Waltz 1979, 6–7)—and the post-WWII commitment to positivism and Humean causation the field of IR experienced a decisive re-orientation away from unit-level analysis and the examination of foreign policy behaviour to more structural and far-reaching explanations. The repercussions of this paradigm shift are still being felt today.<sup>44</sup>

While any description of human affairs necessitates a certain degree of simplification, excessive parsimony generates a parallel model-world that differs fundamentally from the one in which we live and act. Applicable to only a small number of palpable empirical puzzles, such theorising risks existing only for theory’s sake, leading to a production of knowledge that would hardly be valued by others than those who generate this knowledge in the first place (Dessler 1989, 443; Flyvbjerg 2006, 223). In his ferocious critique of the misguided struggles among social scientists, Bourdieu (1988, 744) condemns such “theoretical” theory, a prophetic or programmatic discourse that is its own end, and that stems from and lives from the confrontation with other (theoretical) theories’. He continues, ‘...if you will allow me to plagiarize Kant’s famous dictum: theory without empirical research is empty, empirical research without theory is blind’ (1988, 775). Before Bourdieu, the Florentine thinker, diplomat, historian—and as some would argue the ‘first true political scientist’—Niccolò Machiavelli argued that ‘putting theory to practical use should be the primary goal of political analysis’ (Eriksson 1999, 325–26).

If the purpose of social theory is to understand the social world (Schutz 1967), theoretical instruments and explanations should ‘coincide with our empirical reality to the highest possible degree’ (Singer 1961, 78; Hermann 1987; Herrmann 1988, 177). This exigency brings structural approaches to their limits. While providing comprehensive accounts of the so-called ‘big picture’, structural explanations are limited to general and mostly long-term trends, but cannot account for specific decisions or a particular foreign policy behaviour (Smith 1986, 177). In other words, structural accounts of IR turn a blind eye towards day-to-day policy-making.

The cognisance that compelling explanations of foreign policy-making must consider variables that are both internal and external to the actors has a long history (Rosenau 1968). Observing the void

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<sup>44</sup> Indicative of the dominance of structural explanations in IR is the artificial secession of FPA from IR, with FPA being considered a sub-discipline of the latter.

structural approaches left behind, ‘scholars were drawn to other levels of analysis, to the structure and character of states and societies, domestic politics, bureaucracies and the role of leaders’ (Lebow 2008, 223). Still, the emergence of a more eclectic theoretical approach to the multifaceted empirical world has been impeded by the ongoing battles over the *correct* level of analysis. Accordingly, the greater number of existing studies continue to defend one specific level of analysis. For Bourdieu (1988, 780), such choices are necessarily the product of religious beliefs, and not scientific alternatives. Attempts to explain complex social phenomena, such as the rationale behind France’s military interventions in Mali and the CAR by referring to only one level of analysis seem problematic at best.

Due to the parallel existence of two truisms that define social life (Giddens 1979), a strictly dualistic ontology is improper for conducting empirical investigations. On the one hand, it can be argued that ‘human agency is the only moving force behind the actions, events, and outcomes of the social world’; on the other, ‘human agency can be realized only in concrete historical circumstances that condition the possibilities for action and influence its course’ (Dessler 1989, 443; Wendt 1987, 337–38; Carlsnaes 1992, 260). While the first truism necessitates a prioritisation of actors, the second truism denies that agents can ever act independently of the structure that surrounds and constitutes them. The only solution to this dilemma is to abandon an overly dualistic vision and to include the different dimensions within a single unifying framework.<sup>45</sup>

Precisely because ‘human agents and social structures are in a fundamental sense inter-related entities’, it is not possible to ‘account fully for the one without invoking the other’ (Carlsnaes 1992, 254–56). Attempts to understand agents as either completely socially constructed and determined by structure or as pre-existing units outside of social construction prevents theorists from seeing the whole picture of social action (Wight 1999, 115; 120). Bigo (2011, 236) argues that social scientific analysis, thus, should reject ‘the false alternative of structure versus individual’ (Bigo 2011, 236) and account for both the power of agents and the importance of structural factors. In line with this argument, Crozier and Friedberg (1992 [1977], 44; 91) attribute some constraining functions to the system but, at the same time, maintain that the very same actors, who are constrained by systemic boundaries, are also those

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<sup>45</sup> See also David Lake’s notion of *eclectic, mid-level theory*: ‘Eclectic, mid-level theory ‘rather than defending any single set of assumptions...builds theories to address specific problems of world politics’ (Lake 2013, 573).

who ‘influence’ and—in Foucauldian terms—‘corrupt’ and ‘manipulate’ the system. Structure, defined as a combination of material conditions and social factors, that is, intersubjectively shared ideas (norms, practices, and rules),<sup>46</sup> describes the realm of possibility and in turn limits the available options that actors consider when making decisions (H. Sprout and M. Sprout 1965, 11; Wendt 1999, 139; Bull 2002). France’s colonial experience and Gaullist foreign policy are examples of such intersubjectively shared knowledge structures against the backdrop of which present decision-making takes place. (Knowledge) structures, however, are ‘continually constituted and reproduced by members of a community and their behaviour’ (Adler 1997, 326–27). They are neither immutable, nor do they determine the outcome of a decision. Accordingly, ‘rather than focussing exclusively on how structures constitute agents’ identities and interests’ (Adler 1997, 330), one should seek to explain the *relational* between agents and structures.<sup>47</sup>

Clearly, what is needed is ‘a more “sensitive” appreciation of “the operational relation” between environmental factors and human behaviour’ (Crikemans 2009, 9). While the environment provides ‘a set of opportunities and limitations’, the initiative of action ‘lies with man, not with the milieu encompassing him’ (H. Sprout and M. Sprout 1965, 83). Actors co-constitute and reshape the system—and each other—by interpreting observable events, discourses and eventually actions (Crozier and Friedberg 1992 [1977], 44; 91).

One may argue that combining these demands within one theoretical framework denies the explanatory autonomy of either agency or structure, and thus makes it impossible to conduct any serious empirical or historical research (Carlsnaes 1992, 259; Doty 1997, 375). However, eclecticism does not automatically inhibit empirical investigation. Methodological individualism and methodological structuralism can be combined to an operable mid-level theory by using ideas as explanatory variables. The mutual interest of psychological and constructivist approaches to international relations in human subjectivity and identity provides the necessary element to bridge holism and individualism (Shannon

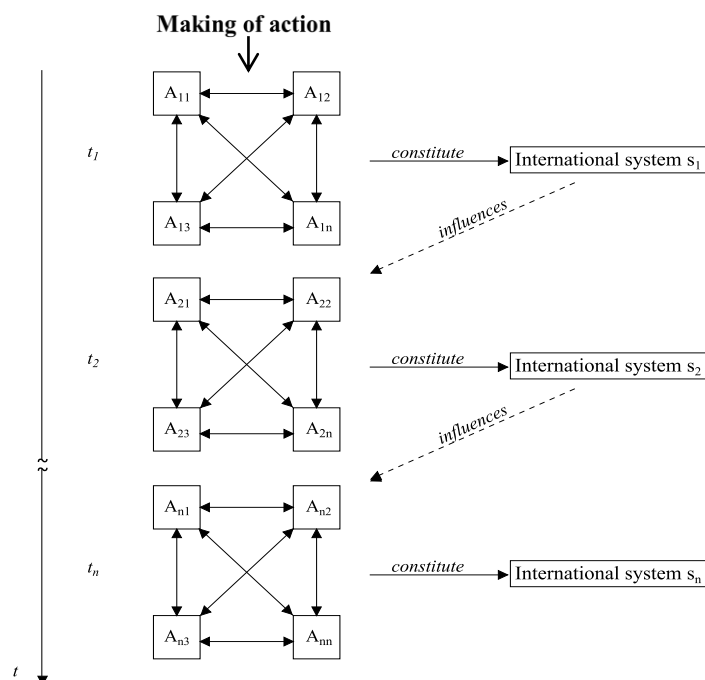
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<sup>46</sup> Adler defines the latter as knowledge structures (Adler 1997, 326–27).

<sup>47</sup> Eun (2012, 771-72) illustrates Crozier and Friedberg’s point by using the metaphor of a football game. While a football game depends on rules (e.g. the prohibition of fouls), conditions (e.g. the weather), and settings (e.g. a pitch with two goals), human agents—and not the structure—are responsible for who wins and who loses the game. He concludes that ‘it is essential to consider human decision-makers’ perceptions, beliefs, personal traits, and the like in the study of foreign policy and world politics’ (see also Hudson 2005).

and Kowert 2012; Cerny 1980, 98).<sup>48</sup>

In abstract terms, “foreign policy interactions” of a given number of actors at  $t_1$  (point one in time) constitutes the international system at  $t_1$  (that is  $s_1$ ). The established structure *influences*—but does not determine—decision-making processes at  $t_2$ , at which point actors’ interactions continue to shape and create an altered international system  $s_2$ , and so on (see fig. 1; see also Dessler 1989, 453; Carlsnaes 1992, 260). It is important to note that the actors in this model are constituted through their mutual engagement: they are not viewed as pre-existent, fully constituted individuals.<sup>49</sup> The struggle for meaning and the interaction between the already existing and the new can only be observed during the process. Similar to a chemist who wants to understand the causes of chemical reactions between different compounds, the social scientist cannot limit her/himself to observing the outcome, that is, the final policy, but rather needs to scrutinise the ‘moment of the making of action’ (Bigo 2011, 237).



**Figure 1. Schematic illustration of the mutual constitution of agency and structure in international politics**

Source: own elaboration

<sup>48</sup> It has to be noted that, while positing that structure and agency are mutually constitutive, many works in the constructivist tradition in practice tend to be structuralist (Shannon 2012, 4; Welch Larson 2012, 59–62). Most prominently, Alexander Wendt considers unit-level factors an important but separate theoretical problem (Wendt 1999, 365).

<sup>49</sup> This makes the approach relational and not solely interactionist.

In sum, while actors are at the heart of this approach they cannot be separated from their specific environment, but rather need to be observed within their social-milieu or field (*champ*). Their actions only become meaningful within an explicit political, cultural, and historical context, which the analyst must take into account (see Chollet and Goldgeier 2002, 175).

## 2.2 The Decision-Making Process from Perception to Action

Having situated this work within the field of IR and proposed an agent-centred framework that remains sensitive to the operational environment, the remainder of this chapter deals with decision-making processes. In particular, it emphasises the role of ideational variables, such as actors' cognitive maps and collective belief systems, by demonstrating how these affect both foreign policy processes and outcomes. Starting from a critique of the dominant rational choice approach, this section proposes a series of tools to capture the actors' subjective perceptions and convictions. The argument builds on the structurationist approach developed above by combining the individual and the collective dimensions of human action.

A decision is always a matter of choice, which presupposes a decider (or a group of deciders),<sup>50</sup> a set of alternatives, and some goals (Allison 1971, 28). Real-world decisions rarely fit into a chess-game like action–reaction scheme. Instead, they emerge from a complex and at times 'mysterious' process. Notwithstanding the idiosyncrasy of each decision, decision-making is not the product of a given decider's unconditional free will but influenced and constrained by a variety of societal factors, the availability of information, trade-offs between different actors and alternative options, bureaucratic and institutional modes of functioning, the operational environment, and last but not least the personality of the actors themselves. Whilst decision-making processes are subject to one or many of these factors at any time, no decision is taken that has not traversed the deciders' ideational prisms. In fact, decision-

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<sup>50</sup> Chapter Three is devoted to a more detailed discussion of the decision-units that make and shape French foreign and defence policy. The notion "decision" is not limited to the very moment of choice, but also include the pre-decisional and post-decisional phases. If the opposite were the case, the approach proposed here would decontextualise the decision from its environment and commit a fallacy similar to the rational actor model.

making is a ‘protension, a future-to-be inscribed in the present’ which cannot be separated from the position, trajectories, and relations of the different actors and their fields (Bigo 2011, 243). According to constructivist epistemology (Piaget 1967) events and objects do not have an intrinsic meaning per se but first need to be made meaningful by strategic actors that recognise the role and importance of a given event (Barnett 1999, 25). For this reason, explanations of foreign policy need to engage with the actors’ subjective understanding of situations.

## 2.2.1 The Limits of Rational Choice in an Irrational World

Classical “economic man” and the rational man of modern statistical decision theory and game theory make optimal choices in narrowly constrained, neatly defined situations. In these situations rationality refers to an essentially Hobbesian notion of consistent, value-maximising reckoning or adaptation within specific constraints (Allison 1971, 29).

The rational-choice approach to decision-making suffers from two noteworthy flaws, which prevent the model from doing justice to the complexity of the social world. First, rational-choice does not deal with ideas and perceptions but ‘takes the identity and interest of actors as outside the analysis’ (Snidal 2002, 75).<sup>51</sup> Since motivations are difficult to measure or to quantify, rational choice scholars prefer deducing generalised preferences of states from theories (Rathbun 2008, 689). The theory assumes that a ‘rational agent is one who comes to a social situation with [already defined] preferences over possible social states’ (Shepsle 1995, 280). As Robert Keohane (1984, 75) acknowledges, in order to use rational-choice logic ‘one needs to make some assumptions about the values and interests of the actors, precisely because the logic alone is empirically empty’. However, by assuming motivations, values, and interests, some of the most interesting aspects of the decision-making process are simply black-boxed and significant questions remain unanswered (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962, 137). In addition, by excluding ‘all mental phenomena from explanations of human behavior’ (Mercer 2005, 78), rational choice models reduce human beings to one-dimensional like units (Lebow 2008, 45).

Proponents of the rational-choice approach have stressed that the model applies—notwithstanding

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<sup>51</sup> For an attempt to endogenise interests and changing preferences in rationalist thinking, see Cohen and Axelrod (1984).

the above criticism—in ‘situations of ultimate danger’, where bureaucratic policies and well established governance procedures are only of limited use and the decision comes down to a small circle of individual agents acting autonomously in the name of the state (Allison 1971, 8–9).<sup>52</sup> The outbreak of war, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and other crisis situations that ask for quick and non-bureaucratic responses by a small group of deciders at first sight seems to be the home turf of the rational-choice model.

In a sense, French security and defence policy should be an easy case for the rational-choice model. The French political system, it may be argued, is construed so that it concentrates power in the hands of a single decider—the president—whenever the nation’s security is at stake or the French military is to be engaged abroad (Treacher 2003, 20). Having said this, the predisposition of the French political system does not dissociate the president from his advisors (and their preparatory work), nor does the complexity of the operational environment disappear (Hagan 2001, 10–11). Even during crisis situations where decision-making is limited to a small circle of persons and crucial aspects such as state survival, sovereignty, or questions on war and peace are at stake, no understanding of a given decision can be achieved without an examination of the norms, values, and beliefs that have influenced the actors during the decision-making process.

To be precise, the criticism of the rational-choice model advanced here does not deny that people may strive to make decisions ‘for the purpose of providing themselves the greatest possible benefits’ and, in this sense, act rationally (Rosati 2000, 49; McNabb 2010, 23). Even in madness, as chief counsellor Polonius in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* famously pointed out, there is method (Shakespeare 2012, act II, scene 2). Rather than challenging the possibility of rational action, I contend that rationality is neither universal nor objectively measurable. This last point relates to a second if not faulty, at least

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<sup>52</sup> The rational actor approach argues that a close analysis of actors’ ideas, perceptions, beliefs, and idiosyncrasies becomes irrelevant during crises. In extreme situations, it is not necessary to engage with personalities of individuals, since all actors share the same and easily deductible preferences. Wolfers (1959, 94) illustrates this with the metaphor of a burning house, which would drive all inhabitants—with the exception of some irrational deviationists—to the nearest exit. The situation is different, if the house, on the other hand, is not on fire but overheated. In this case, it is no longer a question of mere survival and decision-makers’ perception and judgment of the situation once again become salient. Very few events in world politics classify as “burning house situations”. Neither the Malian nor the Central African crises despite France’s cries for urgency, do classify as a “burning house” situation (at least not from the perspective of French actors), leaving decision-makers with a wide array of options and a non-negligible degree of discretion.

fragile assumption underpinning the rational-choice model. In order to apply a cost-benefit calculation and to choose the most appealing of all options, actors would need to have knowledge of all the possible options, including the consequences of each respective solution. The assumption of fully informed actors that pursue predetermined interests by resorting to rational calculus has often proven misleading when tested against the complexities of social reality. Bourdieu (1988, 783) rightly claims, the ‘conditions of rational calculation almost never obtain in practice where time is scarce, information limited, alternatives ill-defined, and practical matters pressing’. As Kissinger (1966, 505) ascertained not without some pathos, ‘Problems are novel; their scale is vast, their nature is often abstract and always psychological’. The non-negligible degree of uncertainty that surrounds any decision and that confronts agents with ‘situations in which [they] cannot anticipate the outcome of a decision and cannot assign probabilities to the outcome’ (Beckert 1996, 804) opens the door widely to subjective reasoning.<sup>53</sup> Uncertainty prevents decisions and goals from being fully rational (Eun 2012, 768). Instead, all decisions (rational or not) are based on incomplete information and are more often than not ‘ambiguous, tentative, and not fully formed’ (Rosenau 1968, 323).

When François Hollande gave the order to intervene militarily in Mali on 11 January 2013, most of the advisors in the Ministry of Defence were not particularly optimistic regarding the possible outcomes of the mission.<sup>54</sup> The existence of this legitimate doubt at the time of the decision illustrates that even those who were in possession of the most reliable intelligence on the security situation in Mali were still facing the deciders’ worst foe—uncertainty. In light of this challenge, French foreign policy actors engaged in processes of strategic construction of the future by delimiting the sense of the undeterminable present (Bourdieu 1987, 160). We will encounter this particular way of rationalising the present and the future at several instances throughout the following empirical analysis. The most

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<sup>53</sup> Considerable similarities exist between the definition proposed here and the notion of “bounded rationality”. Ideational explanations and bounded rationality are compatible. Simon (1985, 294) argues, ‘...if we take into account the limitations of knowledge and computing power of the choosing organism, then we may find it incapable of making objectively optimal choices. If, however, it uses methods of choice that are as effective as its decision-making and problem-solving means permit, we may speak of procedural or bounded rationality, that is, behavior that is adaptive within the constraints imposed both by the external situation and by the capacities of the decision maker....To deduce the procedurally or boundedly rational choice in a situation, we must know the choosing organism’s goals, the information and conceptualization it has of the situation, and its abilities to draw inferences from the information it possesses. We need know nothing about the objective situation in which the organism finds itself, except insofar as that situation influences the subjective representation’.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 27 January 2014.



explicit articulation of this mental shortcut occurred during the decision-making processes that led to Operation Sangaris in the CAR during which French decision-makers created the powerful counterfactual narrative of a potential genocide that had been prevented from happening.

### 2.2.2 If not Rational, What Then?

Social reality is a purposefully constructed edifice that permits human beings to cope with the infinite complexity of the world. In contrast to brute facts, which exist independently of the observer, social reality is a sociolinguistic construct that is inherently related to the actors' subjective interpretation (Searle 1995, 4; Anscombe 1958). Accordingly, the large majority of interests—in contrast to the assumption made by rational-choice models—do not exist outside of specific social identities. Aside from some very basic interests, such as the interest in one's own survival and a 'minimal physical well-being', most interests and preferences are subject to a process of social construction. They are product of a constructed 'self-identity in relation to the conceived identity of others' (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996, 60). An analysis of foreign policy needs to consider this ideational dimension of decisions. In other words, the foreign policy under examination needs to be reconstructed as it appears subjectively to the actors themselves (Simon 1985, 298).

Faced with a great variety of diverse and oftentimes contradictory information, decision-makers select bits of information and disregard others. To compensate for the limited human abilities to achieve clear and comprehensive preference orderliness (March 1978, 598), decision-making depends to a high degree on the actors' perceptions and beliefs, which allow them to make sense of a reality they are unable to fully comprehend (Blyth 2002, 10). Security interests, like all interests and preferences, are not simply given, but emerge from a process of interpretation, during which "natural kinds" traverse actors' ideational prisms to become "social kinds" (Houghton 2007, 27).<sup>55</sup>

As former State Department planner Louis Halle put it, 'the foreign policy of a nation addresses

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<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of the distinction between natural and social kinds see Wendt (1999, 68–71). See also Searle (1995) for a distinction between social/institutional and brute facts.

itself not to the external world, as is commonly stated, but rather to “the image of the external world” that is in the minds of those who make foreign policy’ (quoted in George 1969, 190–91; Wendt 1999, 249).<sup>56</sup> It is important to retain that this argument does not deny the existence of an actor-independent natural world, but simply points to the separateness of the natural and the social worlds, with the possibility of the two being—to a certain extent—even incongruous (Henrikson 1980, 502; Berman 1998, 30). The interesting point here is that ideas do not even need to correspond to the real world in order to be true or important, as long as they are believed by a large and important enough group of actors (Blyth 2002, viii).

Based upon their research on cognitive mapping models of decision-making, Shapiro and Bonham (1973, 161) claim that decision-makers’ beliefs ‘probably account for more of the variance than any other single factor’. In order to select and reject information in a decision-making situation, they argue that decision-makers draw on a combined strategy: on the one hand, they are geared to their own subjective ‘firm beliefs about aspects of international politics’, while on the other, they scan past events to search for analogies that may be applied to understanding present events (Shapiro and Bonham 1973, 159-160, 162). Most people—consciously or not—accept that they are surrounded by a set of ideas and *Weltanschauungen* that guide them through their daily lives and co-determine their perceptions as well as their decisions. Thus, the claim that decision-making cannot be understood independently of the actors’ perceptions may ‘seem to be so unexceptional as to verge on the gratuitous’ (Gold 1978, 572). However, the historic trajectory of the discipline of IR suggests that more research is needed regarding the inclusion of perceptions into the theoretical frameworks of IR and in particular their operationalisation.

In sum, this project insists that subjective realities, perceptions, and ideas matter. The assumption of actors making decisions based on how they perceive the world around them implies that the world a social scientist should be concerned with is a world of ideas. To uncover the ideational dynamics that drive human action the analyst needs to abandon deductively generated models of rationality and embrace social reality inductively by accounting for the actors’ discourses and practices (Bourdieu

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<sup>56</sup> For an early pronouncement of this argument and an excellent discussion of the role of images in international systems, see Boulding (1959).

1987, 62). Behind the declaration that ideas matter a more complex question hides: how do ideational factors affect decision-making processes? A first step in answering this question consists of defining and understanding the mental frames decision-makers use to approach new situations. Ideas can be observed and attributed to either individuals or groups. Ideas at the individual level are conceptualised here as *mental maps*, which have become the principal subject of cognitive and psychological approaches in IR. Ideas that are situated at the level of collectivities, co-determining the self-understanding as well as the behaviour of a polity, are subsumed under the term *political culture*, respectively *strategic culture* in the realm of security policy.

The following three sections enlarge upon these two concepts by highlighting both their distinctiveness and likeness. Drawing on the relationship between structure and agency discussed above, it is argued that a clear-cut distinction between the two concepts does not reflect the empirical reality and hence should be discarded. In line with structurationist theory, a combined approach is proposed.

### 2.2.3 Actors and Mental-Maps

In order for actors to perceive, interpret, and act towards their environment ‘they apply heuristics that facilitate information processing and decision making’ (Weyland 2009, 408). Crisis situations in general and military interventions in particular—such as the attack on Mali’s state sovereignty or the civil conflict in the CAR, which both provoked a military reaction from France—are catalysts of political discourses and constitute ideal laboratories for scrutinising immaterial explanatory variables such as ideas, perceptions, and beliefs (Lawson and Tardelli 2013, 1233).<sup>57</sup> In moments of high uncertainty ‘cognitive heuristics hold special sway’ (Weyland 2009, 409; Blyth 2002, 11; Kienzle 2013, 425). When confronted with an unexpected and novel situation decision-makers resort to ideational frames and

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<sup>57</sup> As Crozier and Friedberg (1992 [1977], 111, footnote 38) note, political and organisational crises should be considered as privileged moments for analysing organisations. However, one should remain prudent when generalising findings generated during moments of crisis. Cognitive frames or decisional procedures other than those prevalent during ad hoc decision-making may be more important once the calm and the routine of day-to-day policy-making return. For the usefulness of crisis situations as a category see also Hermann (1969).

incomplete analogies (Hermann 1969, 416), which limit the realm of possibility and structure the observed environmental facts according to an orderly system making otherwise unmanageable information manageable. In the present study, these simplification- and ordering processes are defined as “mental maps”. An understanding of the actors’ mental maps is crucial if one wants to explain foreign policy-making. As Johnson (2004, 8) shows, ‘cognitive biases, which result from constraints in the way the brain works, allow our decision-making to be skewed by such things as the familiarity of terms and concepts, availability of information stored in the brain, and the framing of the decision’.

The notion of mental map originates from the works of early gestalt psychologists in the 1930s (Henrikson 1980, 497). The pioneering work of Harold and Margaret Sprout—in particular their theorisation of the man-milieu relationship—made a more systematic use of the concept in political sciences and IR possible (H. Sprout and M. Sprout 1965; H. Sprout and M. Sprout 1969; Crikemans 2009). In contrast to experimental psychology, the object of this study is not the mind as such, but the meanings individuals and small groups attribute to observable facts and the expressions they use to frame these facts (see Schutz 1967, xx).

The definition of mental maps proposed here comes close to what the Sprouts define as ‘cognitive behaviourism’, according to which ‘a person reacts to [her] his milieu as [s]he apperceives it—that is, as [s]he perceives and interprets it in the light of past experience’ (H. Sprout and M. Sprout 1969, 45). It is important to retain the distinction that this definition draws between the psychological environment and the operational environment (milieu).<sup>58</sup> The difference between these two dimensions is noteworthy, since the application of a policy solution to the operational environment—that is, the confrontation of an idea with external factors—may cause unexpected and unintended outcomes. Ergo, discrepancies can emerge between the observable outcomes and the actual decisions, which highlight once more that a mere analysis of outcomes is not sufficient to understand a given decision. The

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<sup>58</sup> ‘The Sprouts (1965, 30) actually distinguish the operational milieu, from the total milieu, as being that subset of the total milieu of the decision unit judged relevant or significant for decision-unit performance’ (Gold 1978, 571 footnote 3). This differentiation reminds of Bourdieu’s treatment of the social *champs*. For environmental factors to influence decision-making processes, individuals need to perceive them and react to them. This is what the Sprouts refer to as psychological environment. The operational environment, on the other hand, describes external constraints and conditions that will influence the decisional outcome of an individual’s or a group’s decision, which are many a time independent of the ‘enviromed individual’s perception’ (H. Sprout and M. Sprout 1969, 11).

relationship between beliefs, perceptions, and behaviour is not straightforward (Walker 1990, 414), which accentuates both the need for process orientated analyses and points to the limits associated with an ideational approach to decision-making.<sup>59</sup>

In his study of the geographic mental maps of American foreign policy actors Henrikson (1980, 503) observes that mental maps not only are shaped and influenced by processes of institutionalisation, but also are a result of ‘education and, more broadly, socialization’. Accordingly, decision-makers’ mental maps can only be understood within their historical, political, social, and cultural contexts. Moreover, existing mental maps are not simply ad hoc reactions to external observations and stimuli, but have developed over a longer period. At any moment, an individual’s mental map is a composite—of past experience, present observation, and future expectation. Memory and imagination inform it as well as current realities’ (Henrikson 1980, 505).

Mental maps are at the same time a tool to validate affirmative political discourses, not only in the eyes of the audience but also in the eyes of the narrator. As Dean Acheson put it, ‘the task of those seeking policy support “is not that of the writer of a doctoral thesis ... qualification must give way to simplicity of statement, nicety and nuance to bluntness, almost brutality, in carrying home a point”’ (Acheson 1969, 374-75 quoted in Widmaier 2007, 788; see also Tetlock 2005). Simple storylines and abstract schemata that condense reality and depict it in form of a black-and-white lithograph make for memorable explanations since they are communicable and easier to understand for others (Lebow 2010, 279). In their daily work, political elites develop very pronounced mental maps through which they perceive the environment around them. For de Gaulle, an effective leader must ‘have a particular way of thinking, a thoroughly formed mental set, which is both analytic and synthetic—able to work within the limits of time and space’ (Cerny 1980, 69).

A first glance at the French intervention in Mali illustrates how mental maps work in practice. According to the official discourse, the Malian crisis, without France’s determined intervention, would have resulted in the break-up of the Malian state with serious consequences not only for Mali, the Sahel, and West Africa, but also for the European continent. A direct link has been drawn between instability

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<sup>59</sup> See also Janis (1982, 136; 195), who states that ‘a decision does not necessarily have to have a successful outcome to be rated as a “good-quality” decision’.

in the Sahel region and European security. For instance, Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault asked Parliament, if France should have accepted that ‘terrorists threaten the stability of a whole [West African] region and the security of France and Europe’ (Assemblée Nationale 2013a, 4475; see also Fabius 2013c). Unquestionably, the break-up of the Malian state would have had some impact on the West African and Sahel regions and arguably on Europe as well. However, predicting the exact nature of these consequences is a difficult, if not impossible task. By portraying a given situation as undisputedly true, actors provide the basis for the ensuing problem solution. Mental maps, in other words, are narrative heuristics that help both the narrator and the audience to understand and explain situations of high uncertainty.<sup>60</sup> If we are able to identify the actors’ mental maps, we can say a good deal about their motivations and reasoning, allowing for a better and more precise understanding of a given decision.

This is the central assumption upon which psychological and poliheuristic approaches to foreign policy decision-making build (Jervis 1976; Mintz 2003). This type of analysis, however, tends to be biased towards individual decision-makers (Walker 1990, 409–10).<sup>61</sup> As the above reference to the constitutive dimension of culture and references to the institutionalisation of mental maps suggest, decision-making is embedded within a specific societal and cultural context. The following section explains how societal and cultural variables affect decision-making and why they need to be added to the explanatory framework.

## 2.2.4 Political and Strategic Culture

By definition and due to their origins in human psychology, cognitive images and mental maps are located at the individual level. Psychological approaches to foreign policy analysis assume that speech acts and practices firstly provide insights into the mind-set of the individual under examination. This

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<sup>60</sup> Alexander George (1969, 191, 200) proposes quite a similar definition. Drawing on Nathan Leites’s earlier work, he defines ideational prisms that influence the actors’ perceptions as ‘belief systems’.

<sup>61</sup> The same applies to “Operational Code Analysis”, which singles out specific decision-makers to reconstruct their personal operational codes in order to explain foreign policy decisions. Poliheuristic theory claims to account for various dimensions, in particular the domestic political dimension. However, it considers these factors merely as ephemeral input factors and is less interested in the constitutive aspects of culture (DeRouen 2003).

study claims that the individual and society are mutually constitutive. As George H. Mead argued, the “Self” cannot exist without the “Alter”. Mead emphasises the social nature of the individual when writing: ‘The self ... is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience’ (Mead 1962, 140). Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin in their foundational work on foreign policy analysis agree that decision-making has as much of an individual dimension to it as it has a societal one. Politics, in other words, ‘is not about individual choices made in isolation’ (Druckman and Lupia 2000, 19); it is about collective decision-making where individuals confront each other, test their ideas, defend their positions, and try to persuade. Discourse itself is an intersubjectively shared experience, which requires the theoretical framework to consider the emergence and transformation of ideas at the level of the collectivity. Accordingly, analyses of decision-making processes need to ‘account for the impact of cultural patterns’ and investigate the possible effects ‘of common value orientations held by most members of a whole society’ (1962, 156).

As a common mind-set among a group of people, political culture limits the collective attention ‘to less than the full range of alternative behaviours, problems, and solutions which are logically possible’ (Elkins and Simeon 1979, 128; Johnston 1995, 45). Individual ideas, propositions, and solutions that coincide with the prevailing political culture in a given society are more likely to be accepted and hence to influence the policy-making process (Ciambra 2013, 25; Risse et al. 1999, 157).

Political culture not only operates as a permissive tool but also as a restrictive instrument. According to the logic of appropriateness, political culture defines the boundaries between the thinkable and the unthinkable (Houghton 2012, 151). In other words, the political contests between actors of a specific community engender ‘a collective field of imaginable possibilities’ (Cruz 2000, 277). A comparison of German and French strategic cultures illustrates this point nicely. In contrast to German political culture, French political culture is much less reticent towards the use of military means, in particular in Africa (Malici 2006).

In the field of security studies, scholars summarise collectively shared ideas under the term strategic culture.<sup>62</sup> Like individual maps, strategic culture ‘provides the lens through which national authorities

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<sup>62</sup> Booth (2005, 25) draws a distinction between political and strategic culture. He argues that strategic culture derives from political culture, thus, cannot be used synonymously. See also Kier (1996) and Jepperson, Wendt,

refract the structural position of the state in the international system; it explains the subjective understanding of objective threats to national security, the instruments relied upon to meet those threats, and the preference for unilateral or multilateral action' (Sperling 2010, 11). The concept of strategic culture was first developed by Jack Snyder (1977), who analysed Soviet culture and its impact on decision-making processes during the Cold War nuclear rivalry. Snyder defined strategic culture as the sum total of 'ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behaviour that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to nuclear strategy' (Snyder 1977, 8). Kerry Longhurst, building upon Snyder's definition insists on the gradual evolution and long-term dimensions of the concept. Accordingly, she describes strategic culture as a,

...distinctive body of beliefs, attitudes and practices regarding the use of force, which are held by a collective and arise gradually over time, through a unique protracted historical process. A strategic culture is persistent over time, tending to outlast the era of its original inception, although it is not a permanent or static feature. It is shaped and influenced by formative periods and can alter, either fundamentally or piecemeal, at critical junctures in that collective's experiences. (Longhurst 2004, 17)

In their recent discussion on European strategic culture, Biava, Drent and Herd (2011, 1228) define strategic culture 'as the set of beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, norms, world views and patterns of habitual behavior held by strategic decision-makers regarding the political objectives of war, and the best way to achieve it (Klein, 1991; Duffield, 1999)' (see also Snyder 1977). Induced by the dominant worldviews of the political elites of a given state, their national identity as well as their instrumental and interaction preferences (Sperling 2010, 11), 'strategic culture defines a set of patterns of and for behaviour on war and peace issues' (Booth 2005, 25). It is the expression of some general agreement among the members of a polity about the means and ends of security policy and the use of military force (Baun 2005, 33).

Strategic culture is a helpful concept because it captures collectively shared habits, values, and beliefs that help to explain how and why certain options have been admitted to the realm of possibility and thus entered the political discourse. The concept describes a collective actor's ideational universe.

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and Katzenstein (1996, 57) who argue that 'the organizational culture of the military...is nested in a broader domestic political culture'. At the same time, the two are obviously interlinked.



Put differently, strategic culture is the space within which a given community tests ideas, options, and solutions to a threat or security problem. The concept also ‘sensitizes us to the importance of history’ and allows for insights into the self-image of the actors in question (Booth 2005, 26; Cruz 2000, 276).

The past functions, as demonstrated by Hibbs’s aspiration model (1982, quoted in Simon 1985, 299), as a reference point for future consequences of present decision-making. Beyond that, past discourses and behaviour can constrain present action. Previous commitments made by the same person or their predecessors limit the respective margin of manoeuvre (Sorensen 2005 [1962], 31).<sup>63</sup> It comes as no surprise that studies relying on the concept of strategic culture tend to prefer continuity over change (Rosa 2014). Path-dependency—an essential explanatory variable for institutionalists (Hall and Taylor 1996; North 1990; Pierson 1996)—also shows through the French political discourse. When challenged on the claim to have developed a “new” approach to African security, several senior civil servants and diplomats retorted unanimously, ‘of course, we don’t make a clean sweep... while our approach may be different politically, we still keep the instruments that work well’.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, as we shall see in the subsequent chapters, the patterns of conduct or regularities of behaviour in France’s foreign policy-making towards sub-Saharan Africa have gone through a process of transformation and French actors had to accommodate new mental frames to the existing ones.

Culture is not only constituted with reference to the past but also with reference to the present “Other”. Applying Mead’s (1962) interactionist approach to political culture and state identity, it can be said that the very existence of a state depends on its interactions with the outside world. Laura Neack finds evidence for this argument in her case study on Australia’s role as an Asian Middle Power. She concludes that ‘Australia’s idea of itself in the world was absolutely tied to its relationship with other states’ (Neack 2002, 176). Analysing the Middle East peace process Barnett (1999, 9) comes to the same conclusion, arguing that a common culture emerges from ‘the understanding of oneself in relationship to others’. For France, its permanent seat in the UN Security Council, its EU membership,

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<sup>63</sup> A powerful description of how path-dependency works in practice can be found in Machiavelli: ‘Men almost always follow the paths trod by others, and proceed in their affairs by imitation, although they are not fully able to stay on the path of others, nor to equal the virtue of those they imitate, a wise man should always enter those paths trodden by great men’ (Machiavelli and Bondanella 2005, 20).

<sup>64</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the Foreign Minister, Paris, 31 January 2014. *‘Il s’agit d’avoir une approche politique qui soit différente mais les instruments qui fonctionnent, on les garde’*.

and its role as an active player on the African continent constitute the three most important settings where the French “Self” interacts with the foreign “Other”. Consequently, French elites pay special attention as to how France is perceived by other actors within these three contexts.

The academic community continues to debate ‘whether a given strategic culture determines, or merely shapes, strategic decision-making’ (Biava, Drent, and Herd 2011, 1228; see also Katzenstein 1996, 5). The most explicit expression of this disagreement remains the Johnston–Gray debate (Johnston 1995; Gray 1999). Johnston (1995) holds that cultural, ideational, and normative influences *determine* the behaviour of individual actors (Biava, Drent, and Herd 2011, 1228). In contrast, an opposite understanding includes other variables such as material factors, physical geography, and the structure of the international system and contents itself by arguing that strategic culture merely shapes decision-making processes and outcomes (Desch 1998; Gray 1999; Longhurst 2004; Booth 2005; Toje 2005; Biava, Drent, and Herd 2011, 1228).<sup>65</sup> According to Gray (1999, 50) the difference between the two camps comes down to one question. Should strategic culture be thought of as ‘being out there’ causing behaviour or alternatively as ‘socially constructed by both people and institutions, which proceed to behave to some degree culturally’ (1999, 50)? Toje (2005, 11) claims that ‘strategic culture is the belief that factors such as traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behavior, habits, symbols, achievements and historical experience *shape* strategic behavior and actual policymaking’ (emphasis added). In the words of Gray (1981, 22), ‘strategic culture provides the milieu within which strategic ideas and defense policy decision are debated and decided’. Longhurst (2004, 20) adds that policy-actors ‘are neither cultural dupes nor prisoners but are fully aware of their cultural context. They cannot bluntly contradict foundational elements, but they can try to modify regulatory practices to meet the way in which they interpret, or read, the foundational elements in a new context’. Thus, strategic culture can help to

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<sup>65</sup> According to Glenn (2009), strategic culturalists vary to a considerable degree in terms of their epistemologies. He defines four different typologies: Epiphenomenal, conventional constructivist, post-structuralist, and interpretivist strategic culture (2009, 530). The former two are devoted to generalisations whereas the latter two concentrate on thick description and case-specific details. Works range from structural positivist to interpretive post-positivist. The latter portray actors as active framers of reality, who deploy rhetoric and narratives to either reconfirm or challenge the boundaries of the acceptable (Weldes 1999, 226 quoted in Glenn 2009, 537). Actors are involved in a constant struggle for the dominance of meaning. The emphasis of these studies ‘is not on the permanence of strategic culture but rather its contingent use by state elites, interpreting historical events, national symbols, key strategists, national myths, etc. for instrumental ends according to the situation they find themselves in’ (Glenn 2009, 537). The present study is situated on the conjunction between interpretivist and constructivist approaches, with a slight bias towards the former.

comprehend why decision-makers have taken certain decisions and discarded alternative options (Gray 1981; Johnston 1995).

While accepting the primordial role of ideational factors in the decision-making process, I give preference to the term “culture shapes” over the alternative notion “culture causes” behaviour. Thus this study considers culture to provide ‘context for events and ideas’ (Edward T. Hall quoted in Gray 1999, 56). This nuance is not a backdoor to slip material explanations into the theoretical framework but a way to avoid an overly static view that undermines the autonomy of agents.<sup>66</sup>

## 2.2.5 The Combined Approach

Most studies in the field of foreign-policy analysis examine either intra-institutional and bureaucratic struggles or personal and cognitive traits of specific leaders. Few studies combine both dimensions, that is, the societal and the individual.<sup>67</sup> Social constructivists argue that culture cannot be reduced to individuals but constitutes an inter-subjectively shared property of collectivities or communities (Duffield 1999, 769–70; Legro 1996, 122; Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996, 50). In contrast, cognitive orientated researchers concentrate on the individual at the expense of structural explanations (Houghton 2007, 34; Welch Larson 1994). Each of the two approaches manifests some shortcomings, which the respective other model is well equipped to address. Cognitive approaches overestimate the power and influence of individual actors. Cultural approaches, on the other hand, often fall prey to the structuralist trap. Relying on ‘definitions such as “collectively held ideas, beliefs, and norms”...are so broad and imprecise that they have proven difficult to operationalize’ (Pateman quoted in Desch 1998, 151).

In line with the relational approach developed above, I argue that it is necessary to consider the

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<sup>66</sup> At this point I side with Poore (2003), who defends Gray’s concept of strategic culture as context but simultaneously advocates the use of a more consistent constitutive framework. According to Poore, material factors have no meaning outside of the cultures that condition them (2003, 283).

<sup>67</sup> For instance, Allison’s seminal work on decision-making processes during the Cuban missile crisis is organised along ‘three rough-cut frames of reference’ (1971, v). While separating the different levels of analysis, Allison does not deny the existence of additional conceptual lenses nor the possibility of a grand model that incorporates the features of all three rough-cut frames of reference (Allison 1971, 255–63).

different explanatory dimensions simultaneously for each of the two cases. Psychological analysis without an understanding of the institutional and societal background risks ignoring the important constraints imposed by the operational environment. Institutional analysis without cognitive explanations neglects the human dimension of the policy-making process, which is necessary in order to counteract the empirically void anthropomorphisation of the state.

As Bevir and Rhodes maintain, '[t]he distinction between aggregate and individual is artificial', and whether to focus at a given moment on either of the two depends on the topic to be studied (Bevir et al. 2004, 131). Levy (2003, 254) adds that psychological variables cannot provide complete explanations of foreign policy and, therefore, need to be integrated into 'a broader theory of foreign policy that incorporates state-level causal variables and that explains how the preferences, beliefs, and judgments of key individual actors get aggregated into a foreign policy decision for the state'.

The move towards a combined approach is based on two simple assumptions. Ideas, beliefs, or perceptions are human traits with a non-negligible degree of idiosyncrasy. They would not exist if it was not for the individual. Ergo, for ideational approaches the individual is the irreducible unit of analysis. As the previous section has shown, ideas at the same time do not emerge in a vacuum, but are embedded within a larger social environment. Studies in psychology have demonstrated that self-descriptions and so called internal stimuli—statements describing internal events—are reactions to outside stimuli and socialisation (Bem 1967). These reflections complement the argument developed above with respect to the agent-structure debate: 'Combining microfoundational aspects of individual psychology within a larger social, institutional, and political context offers an opportunity to explore the reciprocal and mutually determinative relationships between people and their environments' (McDermott and Lopez 2012, 197).

In particular, when ideas emerge from a process of public deliberation and are contested at many different instances they become inherently social. Put differently, culture and personality interact with each other and clear lines of demarcation between the two concepts do not exist (Elkins and Simeon 1979, 134). The two levels of analysis, the individual and the group, are complementary and inseparable (Wodak et al. 2009, 16). Most of the time, it is difficult to attribute a given discourse or practice to either personality or societal factors. Usually, 'personality factors merge with cultural background

factors' allowing for group term explanations (Cerny 1980, 13). Accordingly, the distinction between constructivism and psychological approaches to foreign policy analysis becomes superfluous. In contrast, the two approaches lend themselves to form an ideational alliance.<sup>68</sup>

Drawing on recent contributions by Houghton (2007), Flanik (2011), and Shannon and Kowert (2012) this research joins the dialogue between cognitive foreign policy analysis (political psychology) and constructivism. Next to the potential of overcoming the individualism/holism divide, bridging constructivism with psychological approaches may also compensate for the former's difficulty to explain change (Welch Larson 2012, 58–59). The study complements the concept of slowly emerging belief systems with the more ephemeral and situational notion of mental maps and thus avoids a too static vision of policy-making.

In his work, Flanik (2011) achieves a dialogue between the two approaches by introducing metaphors into the theoretical framework. However, bridge-building must not be limited to the concept of metaphors but can be extended to all sorts of utterances and symbols that constitute political discourse. Looking at discursive data such as speeches, interview material, briefing notes, or politicians' memoirs and autobiographies means simultaneously examining the cognitive processes of the authors as individuals (as long as they can be identified) as well as the cultural and ideational background of the group they belong to. Post-structuralist foreign policy analysts advance similar claims when examining the discursive construction of the "Self" and the "Other" in foreign policy-making. Roxanne Doty (1997, 385) argues that 'every utterance (practice) is spoken not only by the voice of a concrete speaker, but also by the anonymous voices of cultural codes'. Elsewhere, applying the discursive practices approach to US's counterinsurgency policy in the Philippines, she points to the 'discursive space' within which policy-makers function and which limits their respective perception of reality (Doty 1993, 303), while highlighting how agents through their discourses have the potential to create a 'particular reality' (Doty 1993, 308).

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<sup>68</sup> Both reject narrow rational-choice assumptions as they can be found in neorealism and neoliberalism (Houghton 2012, 150). Both approaches also claim that ideas emerge over time and that past experience matters in the construction of the present and the understanding of the future. In addition, the two approaches' shared focus on 'ideational factors and process, the importance of identity, and the importance of understanding how agents view the world rather than assuming or imputing the analyst's view—provide grounds for an ideational alliance against prevailing rationalist/materialist approaches' (Shannon 2012, 7).

## 2.3 Crisis Situations, Threat Perception, and Securitisation

The two selected cases of French interventionism in Mali and the CAR both were situations in which policy-makers had to leave the path of normality and were forced to act under increased pressure, time constraints, and against the backdrop of a high level of uncertainty. Above, I pointed to the fact that even under such exceptional conditions ideas matter a great deal when it comes to explaining a given decision. In the following, I go one step further in arguing that it is *in particular* during crisis situations that the struggle between different ideas and competing mental frames can be observed. Due to the fact that ‘agents must argue over, diagnose, proselytize, and impose on others their notion of what a crisis actually *is* before collective action to resolve the uncertainty facing them can take any meaningful institutional form’ (Blyth 2002, 9), policy ideas and hidden assumptions come to the forefront of the discourse. Whether or not a given situation is defined as a crisis depends much on the successful framing of an issue, which in turn depends on the persuasive power of the different competing ideas as well as on the actors’ cultural and social capital. Being instances of intensive ideational struggles, crisis situations as a specific class of events are particularly well suited for a close analysis of the actors’ ideational frames. To remain with the metaphor of the chemist, crisis situations are the test strips used to visualise the impact of ideas in foreign policy-making.

Threats, danger, and security are not objective conditions or immutable objects that are somewhere “out there” awaiting to be analysed, but themselves result from processes of meaning-giving and are ‘effects of interpretation’ (Campbell 1998, 1–2). As Williams (2003, 513) notes, security should be ‘treated not as an objective condition but as an outcome of a specific social process: the social construction of security issues (who or what is being secured, and from what) [should be] analysed by examining the “securitizing speech-acts” through which threats become represented and recognized’. The concept of *securitisation*, as developed by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, emphasises the ‘inherently political nature of any designation of security issues’ (Waever 1999, 334). Besides all the praise it received, the securitisation has induced a wide range of criticism. Some pundits describe

the idea as ‘sociologically untenable’ (McSweeney 1996, 89), while others dismiss the approach upfront as politically irresponsible (Eriksson 1999; see also Williams 2003, 512). The contentiousness that surrounds this concept can be explained by the fact that securitisation confronts analysts, decision-makers, and political activists with an ethical question ‘why do you call this a security issue?’ (Waever 1999, 334). During my fieldwork, I experienced strong reactions by decision-makers and policy-advisors as soon as I explained that this study explores processes of threat construction.

One can say, it was us, who have constructed the threat. But, no! If you go to Mali you are going to see, if the threat has been constructed. I know the country a little bit. I can tell you, if you are a woman... in the past, you never had any problems. However, today men refuse to shake hands with you. This is a reality. This is not us having decided that there is a terrorist threat.<sup>69</sup>

Security and social constructivism continue to be seen by many as an incomparable pair. All the more, it is important to retain the difference between the psychological and the operational environment, mentioned above. External language independent facts stipulate the securitisation of an issue (Searle 1995, 61). However, this does not invalidate the claim that threat perception is a process of discursive construction. ‘After all’, as Cruz (2000, 275) points out, ‘we approach reality rhetorically—that is, with an intent to convince’. This is what Aristotle meant when arguing that ‘human beings are naturally political animals who require and use language to pursue political ends’ (Woods 2006, 51). At the same time, rhetoric does more than convincing a given audience; it gives meaning to objects and sense to a reality. In the same line, the concept of securitisation does not negate the urgency and the seriousness of the two crises in Mali and the CAR nor the committed violence on the ground but holds that only by resorting to the discursive construction of a threat it is possible to understand how, why, and when a given issue becomes a threat in the eyes of the actors under examination.<sup>70</sup> Securitisation, in other words, is primarily interested in the processes that contribute to the inclusion, the framing, and the solving of a certain issue as a question of security.

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with a policy officer at the Francophonie Organisation, Paris, 1 October 2013. ‘*On peut toujours dire, c’est nous qui ont construit la menace, etc... Non ! Allez-y au Mali et vous allez voir si elle est construite la menace. Moi, je connais un tout petit peu le pays, et je peux vous dire quand vous êtes une femme et vous arrivez— jusqu’ici vous n’avez jamais eu un problème—et les hommes commence à vous refuser vous serrer la main. C’est une réalité. Ce n’est pas nous qui ont décidé qu’il y a un danger terroriste*’.

<sup>70</sup> As I argued above, there are very few objective and universally shared threats in the international system such as the approaching end of the world or a fatal attack by extra-terrestrials.

## 2.4 The Empirical Challenge: Some Notes on Method

Having established the theoretical pillars on which this study rests, the remainder of this chapter addresses the challenges related to the operationalisation of this research. In his article on the empirical application of cognitive foreign policy analysis, Richard Hermann (1988, 175) asserts that it 'is much easier to argue for the merits of a theoretical frame that includes variables pertaining to decision-making, than it is to identify how the values of these variables will be inferred'. This statement remains pertinent, in particular since no theory or model can discharge the researcher from 'the need to carry on painstaking empirical research' (Simon 1985, 303). Herrmann (1988) refers to two major challenges in particular when dealing with ideational and cognitive variables. First, the conceptual framework must be able to match the increased complexity that emerges from treating 'humans as subjects rather than scientific objects'. Second, a sound qualitative methodology that is capable of competing with the persuasiveness of positivist explanations needs to be developed (1988, 175).

The translation of abstract 'thought experiments' (Keohane 1984, 66) into empirical analysis of real world problems is a question of method. Methods are not ends in themselves, but always serve a purpose (Leander 2008, 12). In other words, neither the underlying research question nor the theoretical framework developed here are innocent methodologically speaking. They allow for some methodologies and foreclose others. For the purpose of this project, the methodology must support the investigation of specific decision-making processes. Moreover, it needs to provide techniques that trace both individual and collectively shared ideas. The type of methodology that responds best to these requirements is interpretative and mainly qualitative. Qualitative research applies to small-sample studies of one or a few cases (McNabb 2010, 24). As Firestone (1993, 22) holds, qualitative methodologies are best 'for understanding the processes that go on in a situation and the beliefs and perceptions of those in it'. Qualitative research generates in-depth knowledge of a small number of cases and its findings are applicable to real-world policy contexts. On the downside, up-close



observations of social phenomena are more difficult to translate into general laws (George and Bennett 2005, 90; VanderStoep and Johnston 2009, 167).<sup>71</sup>

#### 2.4.1 Content and Discourse Analysis

Since there is no direct access to the minds of decision-makers, researchers depend on substitute data that allow for making inferences about perceptions and thoughts of individuals and larger groups. This substitute data presents itself in form of ‘observable consequences’ (1988, 180)—that is, discourse and documentary material, which the researcher examines to make inferences about perceptions, beliefs, and cognitions of her/his research subjects (Axelrod 1976c, 7–10). The suggestion of a corollary between discursive practices and ideational factors is based on the assumption that all ‘inner life achieves an outward expression’ (Schutz 1967, xix). In other words, ‘beliefs become actions through the medium of language’ (Kowert 2012, 43).

Language takes a prominent role throughout this study. All sources I examined are language-based sources, that is, written or oral discourse, public or private conversations between actors and their respective audiences. By focussing on speech acts I do not mean to deny that a world independent of language exists, but simply contend that ‘we can never *know* that (beyond the fact of its assertion), because the existence of the world is literally inconceivable outside of language and our traditions of interpretation’ (Campbell 1998, 6).

For the purpose of analysing the data, content and discourse analysis were used in a complementary manner.<sup>72</sup> Content analysis focuses on the coding and the analysis of text, whereas discourse analysis in the Foucauldian tradition, is more interested in how discourse provokes particular actions and considers coding only as a preliminary task (Potter and Wetherell 1994, 49, 52).<sup>73</sup> Following the data

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<sup>71</sup> Structuralists criticise qualitative methodology exactly on these grounds. This criticism needs to be taken seriously, in particular with regard to the study’s implications beyond the selected cases. I will come back to this point in the conclusion of this work.

<sup>72</sup> Bratberg (2011, 337–38) refers to *ideational design* to describe the combination of qualitative content analysis and discourse analytical methods.

<sup>73</sup> Foucauldian discourse analysis assumes that discourses constitute objects and subjects (Alvesson and Karreman 2000).

collection,<sup>74</sup> I coded all data with the help of the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo®. The coding categories emerged inductively from the text and were not defined prior to the analysis. The aim was to avoid an excessive pre-structuration of the texts into categories, which arise from the analyst's own subjective mental maps (Tsygankov 2012, 6). The coding concentrated on concepts, phrases, and arguments, not on single words. At this preliminary stage I equalled frequency with importance, however, probed this assumption during the qualitative interpretation of the data.

Content analysis has been criticised for removing the textual fragments under examination from their actual context, thus, counting words but being unable to interpret them (Billig quoted in Wilson 1993, 1).<sup>75</sup> Including discourse-analytical tools in the research design helps to overcome this criticism. Discourse analysis not only asks what has been said, but also enquires how, to whom, and with which purpose something has been said. The added-value of discourse analysis as a method<sup>76</sup> can be illustrated by the example of public speeches. Public speeches are not only linguistic devices of communication, but also means of power. Discourse controls social action through acts of exclusions. It permits some ways of thinking and acting while it inhibits others. Discourse drives subjectivity and determines meaning (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000, 1131). Foucault (1971, 55) defines discourse as a 'violence that we do to things...[and] a practice that we impose on them'. This understanding of discourse is in line with the concept of securitisation discussed above. When analysing the data, I always kept an eye on the context within which a specific discourse had been pronounced and the audience towards which it was directed.

One of the principal problems related to an ontology that focuses on human subjects and their utterances concerns the reliability of the sources. Holsti refers to a 'credibility gap' the researcher needs to overcome when working with subjective documentary data (Holsti 1976, 42). Information may be distorted or biased. Political leaders, diplomats, and civil servants—for political, diplomatic, or professional reasons—may not say what they think and think what they do not say (Levy 2003, 262;

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<sup>74</sup> A more detailed description of the data collection is provided below under the section "Sources".

<sup>75</sup> Krippendorff (2004, xxii) argues that this is a popular misconception and coding is only a small part of content analysis.

<sup>76</sup> Discourse analysis remains a contested term. Some regard it as a method while others consider it to be a discipline (Pierce 2008, 279).

Bevir et al. 2004, 138). As Prunier (1995, 280) puts it when analysing France's reaction to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, 'whether the French government really believed its own fabrications, and whether its fantasies were convenient decoys or deeply-held beliefs, is hard to say.' In light of these constraints, the distinction between instrumental and representational communication may be difficult at times. Not only for the analyst but also for the actors these two dimensions or functions of discourse are inextricably intertwined. Wodak et al. (2009, 8) acknowledge that 'discourse constitutes social practice and is at the same time constituted by it'. Each speech act, I argue, is instrumental and constitutive at the same time. A purely instrumental use of rhetoric is impossible, since speech acts do not exist outside of the realm of social practices that shape and co-determine them. Put differently, even an outright lie in the political realm contains elements that tell us something about the social context and the motivations that it tries to conceal.<sup>77</sup>

In the following, whenever possible, I point to the instrumental and the foundational dimension of a given utterance and draw the distinction between the two. To do so, control strategies need to be developed that increase the validity of the claims made in this research project (Duffield 1999, 794; Holsti 1976, 44). Although there is no definitive solution to this methodological challenge, the risk of getting caught in the trap of deliberately false rhetoric can be minimised by several tactics. First, using a wide range of sources instead of only one kind of data allows for crosschecking. Second, collected statements have been checked against secondary literature in order to estimate the reliability of a specific source. Third, personal and confidential interviews with political elites have complemented the analysis of the official discourse. Fourth, at all times particular attention has been paid to the specific social and cultural contexts within which given utterances have been produced (Holsti 1976, 44). However, even after employing these strategies, a small margin of error needs to be accounted for. While prudence is advisable when dealing with subjective and non-quantifiable data, there is no reason

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<sup>77</sup> For example, the French official discourse insists on the fact that the intervention in Mali was completely unrelated to French uranium mining activities in neighbouring Niger. Several pundits, however, identified France's interest in Niger's uranium as principal driving force (I will elaborate on this claim in Chapter Four). Let us assume for the moment that French policy-makers lied to their audience. This lie would still provide us with insights into the collective belief systems that prevail among decision-makers. In this specific case, it would tell us that "having mining" interests in Niger does not constitute an acceptable justification of intervention both in legal and moral terms.

to discard them as unreliable. By far, not all verbal communication between decision-makers and the public is necessarily fraudulent. In contrast, it can be assumed that the majority of the verbal data actually reflects the central motives of decision-makers (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962, 148; Siroux 2011, 36–37). Without any consistency between their assertions and their actions, politicians would discredit themselves as untrustworthy and insincere (Axelrod 1976b, 253).

## 2.4.2 The Case Study Method

Cases are not a priori delimited, but the result of deliberate choices made by the researcher (Vennesson 2008, 227). When selecting the cases, and subsequently, working on them, I found McNabb's six step-approach a useful guideline (McNabb 2010, 239–43):

1. Frame the case
2. Operationalise key constructs
3. Define units of analysis
4. Collect the data
5. Analyse the data
6. Present and prepare a report of the findings

Framing a case means justifying its selection and explaining the purpose of this choice. The general rationale for the case selection presents itself in detail both in the introduction and in Chapter Two. There is no need to repeat the arguments at this point. It is sufficient to say that both cases are representatives of a family of cases that can help generate a better understanding of decision-making processes of current French security policy in sub-Saharan Africa. The *key constructs* have been operationalised in this chapter. The *definition of the units of analysis* has been evoked in the present chapter and will be elaborated in Chapter Three. The translation from theory into empirical research—that is, the actual collection and analysis of the data resulted in Chapters Four and Five. To reconstruct mental maps and cultural belief systems of French decision-makers and to trace their impact on policy outcomes, I have examined two cases of France's recent security policy towards sub-Saharan Africa: the French military intervention in Mali (Operation Serval) and the French peacekeeping

operation in the CAR (Operation Sangaris). France's military intervention in Mali constitutes the principal case. Not only did this important mission lead to the generation of a large amount of unexploited data, but it also showed a radical deviation from France's renewed policy paradigm of security policy in Africa, which informed the country's initial position during the Malian crisis. The second case builds on the first one and probes the generated findings within a slightly different context. The situation on the ground, the declared enemy, and the proposed solution were different. At the same time, the French intervention in the CAR gave rise to a whole set of similar motives and justifications. Such a replication allows for broader claims about the mental maps and ideas that have influenced the Hollande administration in their day-to-day policy-making. This is what George and Bennett refer to when evoking a well-structured research design that allows for a comparison between the selected cases (George and Bennett 2005). Firestone proposes 'case-to-case' transfer—that is, adopting conclusions from one case to another one—as a way to widen the findings and to allow for some degree of generalisation.

Lastly, the case selection was as much guided by analytical criteria as by the developments on the ground. This research began in the second half of 2011. At that time, the situation in Mali albeit instable was far from being explosive. Nor was the CAR considered a greater as usual risk to regional or international security. While this study started by employing the approach developed here to three historical case studies of French interventionism in sub-Saharan Africa, the events in 2012 and 2013 have generated two more pertinent cases studies for the purpose of the present argument and provided the unique opportunity to follow the decision-making processes very closely.

### 2.4.3 Sources

Since the central purpose of this project is to reconstruct the decision-making processes that led to military interventions in Mali and the CAR, data needed to be compiled that contains information about the two cases as well as the mental maps and belief systems behind France's foreign and security policy, its relations with the African continent, and its role in the international system. This data has been

collected from official statements made during press conferences or other interview situations. The data also include the minutes of weekly hearings of the foreign minister and the defence minister in front of parliamentary committees as well as governmental declarations made in either the Senate or the National Assembly.<sup>78</sup> A total of 659 sources have been coded for the two cases (294 for Mali and 365 for the CAR, see appendix 1), representing what is often referred to as ‘legitimate’ or ‘official’ data (Dunn 2008, 87–8).

The official sources have been supplemented by thirty-two semi-structured high-level interviews with politicians, diplomats, military personal, journalists, and researchers conducted in Paris between May 2013 and December 2014 (see appendix 2; Aberbach and Rockman 2002).<sup>79</sup> These interviews provide valuable background information regarding the decision-making process, the internal organisation and power dynamics of the French state apparatus, as well as (at times critical) annotations to the official discourse. Most importantly, they express the subjective understanding of some of the core actors and highlight the personal dimension of decision-making processes.<sup>80</sup>

The specific approach to interviewing is determined by the socio-cultural milieu to which the respective interviewees belong as well as their national and linguistic identity. I primarily resorted to semi-structured, open-ended interviews. This type of interview technique enables the interviewees to construct their own arguments, yet, within a framework predefined by the researcher (Cohen 1999, 8).

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<sup>78</sup> The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosts a comprehensive online database that includes all official French foreign policy declarations made since 1990. See: Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, ‘Basedoc: Déclarations officielles et points de presse’, <http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/>, accessed 12 October 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Two interviews were conducted in 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Too often, interviewing is considered as merely a supplementary tool that furnishes research reports with some real-life colour. Rationalists as well as behaviouralists discard interviews on the ground of being unreliable or less relevant sources of social enquiry. While for behaviouralists interviews are ‘subjective and imprecise and therefore subject to multiple interpretations’, for rationalists the agents’ opinion is of little importance since all agents ‘respond the same way to the same stimuli’ (Rathbun 2008, 685–86). Moreover, the detailed and relative idiosyncratic nature of information retrieved through interviews does not fit well with the general strive for parsimony and generalisation in political science. While these arguments should be taken seriously, they should not lead us to conclude that interviews are slippery data that are to be used sparingly at most. Undoubtedly, while the subjectivity of interview data is one of their major caveats, it is also the true added value and the reason for which to conduct interviews in the first place. Data gathered from interviews are not expected to tell an objective ‘truth’. Interview material reflects the subjective interpretation of selected events by an individual or a group of people. In general terms interviews allow ‘to go in-depth as secondary sources, survey, or archives do not allow’ (Rathbun 2008, 688). In contrast to other sources, interviews do not serve to discover observable behaviour, but help ‘to understand the meaning of that behavior’ (Seidman 2006, 10). For Axelrod (1976a, 363), spontaneously spoken words are to be preferred to written words because they ‘may provide a better indication than carefully composed words of how the person thinks about an issue on his [her] own’. In fact, ‘interviewing is often the best-suited method for establishing the importance of agency or ideational factors such as culture, norms, ethics, perception, learning, and cognition’ (Rathbun 2008, 690).

Maintaining a small degree of predefined structure, semi-structured interviews also lay the ground for the so-called horizontal thematic analysis—that is, a comparison of the same or similar themes across an entire corpus of interviews (Barbillon and Le Roy 2012, 54). The approach allows for categorising and comparing responses thematically.

Given this study's target group—state elites—open-endedness is another crucial criterion. Aberbach and Rockman (2002, 674) advise that 'elites especially—but other highly educated people as well—do not like being put in the straightjacket of close-ended questions'. Bourdieu, in the edited volume *La Misère du Monde* (1998 [1993]) affirms that interviewing always involves a degree of “symbolic violence”, which is imbalanced in favour of the interviewer, the socially dominant, and against the interviewee, the socially dominated. This power relationship is inverted when the subjects are elites (Cohen 1999, 5–7, 9). Next to the initial difficulty of gaining access to senior officials who are widely sought after, the major challenges lies in gaining the subjects' confidence, trust, and acceptance. Thus, thorough preliminary preparation is essential in order to reduce the distance between the researcher and the interviewee. Institutional affiliations with respected research institutes or universities and personal recommendations by already established contacts facilitated the process of getting in the door and created additional confidence.

## 2.5 Conclusion and Research Question

In this chapter I have argued that a comprehensive understanding of decision-making processes requires ideational factors to be at the core of the analysis. In an attempt to 'bring human beings back into the IR theoretical enterprise and put them at the intersection of all other forces about which we theorize' (Hudson 2002, 17), I have developed an agent-centred approach that traverses the boundaries between individualism and holism. Cognitive maps and intersubjectively shared belief systems have the potential to provide central insights into decision-making processes.

The theoretical framework serves both to justify and to enable the empirical analysis. Ideational factors are identified as essential variables for explaining foreign policy behaviour. While the theoretical

framework does not negate the impact of material interests and structural factors, it suggests that ideational factors are equally if not more salient than often assumed (Widmaier 2007, 780–81).<sup>81</sup> For material variables to influence decision-making processes they need to traverse actors’ cognitive prisms. While ideas ‘go all the way through social reality’ they do not go all the way down into an a-material nothingness’ (Blyth 2002, 30). The study’s empirical focus on two crisis situations challenges rationalist approaches on their home turf. This study argues that crises cannot be analysed with reference to predetermined interests and preferences. Instead, the idiosyncrasy and ad hoc nature of these situations leave room for interpretation. It is the observer’s task to uncover why certain interpretations are preferred over others.

The theoretical framework enables the analysis insofar as it provides the necessary conceptual ground for examining both philosophical and instrumental beliefs of French elites (Walker 1990, 405–6). The examination of mental maps of actors of a given *champ* produces a comprehensive understanding of past decisions and allows for informed guesses regarding the actors’ likely future responses in similar settings. When applied to the two case studies of France’s recent military interventions in Mali and the CAR, the framework gives rise to following central questions:

- ❖ *What were the French actors’ mental maps when deciding on the military interventions in Mali and the CAR?*
- ❖ *How did these maps emerge and where did they come from?*
- ❖ *What kind of normative justifications were advanced?*
- ❖ *To what extent were the arguments congruent with France’s strategic culture?*
- ❖ *What do these cases reveal about France’s self-perception of its role in the world, including its relationship with the African continent?*

For analytical purposes I distinguish between three different ‘moment[s] of the making of action’ (Bigo 2011, 237): *perception, diffusion and framing, and the decision itself*.<sup>82</sup> A problem, such as a

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<sup>81</sup> According to Mark Blyth (2002, 17–18) one of the shortcomings of past ideational explanations was the tendency to ‘treat ideas and interests as radically different and unrelated concepts’. I agree with Blyth that this is ‘logically untenable’ by arguing that ideas and interests are not two different things but two dimensions of the same thing.

<sup>82</sup> The clear-cut tripartite division is a deductive move and not an empirical observation. In reality the different phases are interwoven. The three stage model draws on Harold Laswell’s policy cycle, which comprises the



security threat, emerges from a ‘perceived discrepancy between present conditions and what is desired’ (Hermann 2001, 53). Security threats are subjective and depend on the policy-makers’ perceptions. Thus, in a first step the appearance of an issue on the security agenda needs to be probed. When and how did the Malian and the Central-African crises appear on the French security agenda? What frames were used in order to interpret political instability? What alternative frames were discarded? The second step in the decision-making process—the diffusion of ideas—involves self-persuasion and persuasion of others. The actors’ main task is to raise awareness that a problem exists and something needs to be done about it. Since discourse is a constitutive part of actions, events and situations (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 21), the process of persuasion and diffusion contributes to the actors’ threat perception and influences the framing of issues. Put differently, the cognitive maps, analogies, and metaphors decision-makers use in their public discourse both inform policy-makers and help to justify and advocate their decisions. Cognitive heuristics are simultaneously diagnostic and instrumental tools (Khong 1992, 13–17). Decision-makers gradually adjust their own mode of reasoning to the evolving discourse. During this process of securitisation, a political problem becomes a security problem. Accordingly, in a second section the study asks what kind of arguments were brought forward to justify action and how can the choice of specific arguments be understood. During the third phase, arguments that retroactively justify the decision take centre stage. Justifications can be directed towards a domestic or an international audience and can advance moral or legal reasons for a given action. In both cases, justifications deliver insights into the self-perception of the actors under investigation. Justifications speak ‘directly to, and therefore reveals something about, normative context and shared social purpose’ (Finnemore 2003, 15).

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following five stages: agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, evaluation (Savard and Banville 2012).

## Chapter Three

# On Women and Men: Decision-Making in the Realm of Foreign and Defence Policy

*Government is not a body of blind forces; it is a body of [wo]men ... not a machine but a living thing. It falls, not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton.*

—Woodrow Wilson

*Strategic theory without strategic anthropology consigns the study of a threat and use of force to capabilities analysis, the crudities of old-style political realism and the flaws of the rational actor approach.*

— Ken Booth

After having established the study's theoretical framework, the principal purpose of this chapter is to present the decision-units responsible for securitisation discourses and practices and explain the institutional setting that enables their (inter)actions.<sup>83</sup> Given this study's focus on processes, perceptions, and ideas, the rhetorical simplification of considering states as 'centrally coordinated, purposive individuals' (Allison 1971, 3) poses some difficulties (cf. Wendt 1992). Instead of echoing the procrustean anthropomorphisation of the state, I propose concentrating on those 'entities capable of experiencing needs, formulating problems, perceiving phenomena by seeing, hearing, and other sensory behavior'—in other words, on 'flesh-and-blood human beings', their actions and relations (H. Sprout and M. Sprout 1965, 207). The notions of agency and actors have already been used extensively, however, without having been defined yet. As the link between the preceding theoretical framework and the subsequent empirical analysis, the chapter oscillates between theory and practice. In so doing, it attempts to render theory meaningful and practice intelligible (Bourdieu 2012, 45–77). It is argued

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<sup>83</sup> The term decision-unit is borrowed from Hagan (2001); see also Gold (1978, 569) and Hermann (2001). A decision-unit is a compound notion that describes both the institutional set-up of specific functions and the subjective interpretation by individual agents. This is to differentiate from the term 'decision-maker', which exclusively refers to human agents.

that in order to understand decision-making, both the formal function of public offices and the holders' personal interpretation of their functions need to be examined. Since different leaders respond differently to their environment and thus act differently, it is crucial to account for their leadership style and personal traits when examining a given decision-making process (Hermann et al. 2001, 95–96).

The first section of this chapter provides a definition of agency. The second section identifies the central decision-units responsible for the military interventions in Mali and the CAR. This section—building on the assumption that the offices and personalities of their holders cannot be analytically separated—engages first with the formal institutional set-up of the different decision-units and then with the decision-makers themselves. The chapter concludes by depicting an interactionist scheme of decision-making processes that accounts for both formal and informal structures of government (Hermann 2001, 57–58). A look behind the curtain of the policy-making process allows for tracing the emergence and the creation of ideas instead of simply assuming their existence.

### 3.1 A Definition of Agency

*France decided to intervene in Mali!* This linguistic shortcut is widely used in the media, as well as in political and academic debates. It is not simply some sort of 'disinterested' notion, but a meaning-giving term with a political agenda (Leander 2011, 306). It ascribes to the state the quality of being an actor of its own, capable of perceiving events, having or acquiring preferences, and acting according to specific motivations. The use of this shortcut contributes to the illusion of the state being more than a *croyance collective* (collective belief), which is a dangerous fiction that prevents us from actually thinking about the state and its actions (Bourdieu 2012, 25).

As has been shown in in the previous chapter, the objectification of the state does not allow for in-depth analyses of the underlying decision-making processes without some further qualification. The 'states-as-sole-actors' approach obscures the constituting force of human agency towards action; it disregards processes and consequently remains biased towards outcomes. The theoretical shorthand of the state being an actor in international relations can only be justified, 'if we understand what spelling our sentences out in the underlying language would look like and what the meaning of those sentences

would be in that fuller language' (Hudson 2005, 5). The packaging of 'the activities of various officials of a national government as actions chosen by a unified actor, strongly analogous to an individual human being' (Allison 1971, 36), cannot explain the impact of perceptions, cognitive frames, and motivations of the different actors within the system (Crozier and Friedberg 1992 [1977], 46). Decision-making in the realm of public policy is steered by individuals and small groups that engage in the discursive construction of reality. A simple scaling up of individual-level identity to collective identity ignores the crucial 'interactive processes', which are at the heart of all social phenomena (McDermott and Lopez 2012, 201).<sup>84</sup>

The 'states-as-sole-actors' approach (Wolfers 1959, 83) may grasp traits of national culture and their impact on foreign policy outcomes, but does not account for the emergence of ideas and their trajectories through the institutional, political, and social space.<sup>85</sup> In addition, spirit—the sine qua non for the development of ideas and identities—'is a purely human drive'. Since 'organizations and states do not have psyches'; they 'cannot be treated as persons' (Lebow 2008, 62). Consequently, they cannot be actors but are simply frameworks that allow for social action. 'To say that something is in the interest of the state is like saying that a good roof is in the interest of the house, when what one really means is that a good roof is considered vital by the house's inhabitants who value the safety, completeness, and reputation of their residence' (Wolfers 1959, 86). Most of these insights are not new. Similar to Wolfers, Morgenthau (1948, 73) observed that 'when we speak of the power or of the foreign policy of a certain nation, we can only mean in empirical terms the power or the foreign policy of certain individuals...'. Beyond the small world of international relations theory, these findings are often considered common-sense knowledge. For the majority of civil servants and political leaders, policy-making is not at all about rules and structure but firstly about human beings, their ideas and interactions (see Bourdieu

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<sup>84</sup> This is a fundamental difference between the approach proposed here and mainstream constructivism. For instance, in Alexander Wendt's influential constructivist theory there is no space for politicians, administrators, heads of states etc.; in short for human beings (Wight 1999, 127). This shortcoming is common to many constructivist approaches, which are 'famously unclear about who the carriers of this strategic culture are' (Mérand 2008, 23).

<sup>85</sup> Culture examined at the state level leads to 'ethnocentric, essentializing gross generalizations of large groups of people' at the expense of more fine-tuned analyses of the culture of sub-groups within a given state (Johnston 1999, 522).

1987, 151).<sup>86</sup>

This is not to say that individuals should be decontextualised and analysed outside of the institutional setting that defines their roles and establishes the rules of the game. The argument advanced here is no negation of the state. Although the state ‘has no physical existence, like a building or a lamp-post...it is nevertheless a real entity. It is a real entity because everyone acts as though it was’ (Cox 1992, 133). The discourses of individual leaders cannot be understood as happening in a vacuum, but always need to be embedded within the larger institutional context. Therefore, a definition of the state is wanted. Drawing on Bourdieu, in the present study the state is understood as a field, composed of several sub-fields within which various actors pursue their own agendas and struggle for symbolic dominance. The state figures as an ideational and normative structure (i.e. the field) and constitutes an orthodoxy and collective fiction established around a consensus regarding the sense of the world (Bourdieu 2012, 14–15; 19). The state seen as a field effectively limits but does not annihilate individual action.

There is a second point worthy of note. Being a representative of a group involves what psychologists define as personality dissociation—the “I” annihilates itself in favour of the group. Throughout this process a new identity emerges, the “we”. This comprises both elements of the former “I” and elements that are perceived as inherent to the group identity. A good discursive illustration of this argument can be found during the 2012 French presidential election campaign. In a televised debate between the two presidential candidates, François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy, the former concludes his speech by a list of issues he promises to deal with should he be elected president. Each of the points on Hollande’s bulleted list is preceded by the clause ‘I, President of the Republic...’.<sup>87</sup> This anaphor simultaneously refers to the “I” and the office of the president of the Republic. In so doing, Hollande distinguishes between himself the individual and himself the potential future president (Hollande 2012n). In order to understand the practices and properties of the emerging “we”—that is, the “I” as individual and the “I” as spokesperson of the group—it requires some knowledge about the apparatus and the society that the spokesperson represents (Bourdieu 1987, 193–99). Immediately after his election on a state visit to the United States, President François Hollande emphasises his strong

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<sup>86</sup> General Eric Bonnemaïson, director of the DAS, interview by author, Paris, 27 August 2013.

<sup>87</sup> ‘*Moi Président de la République...*’.

identification with the collective when saying, ‘I represent France, together with the ministers that accompany me—we are France—and I have to take on the role my compatriots expect me to take on in order to represent them’.<sup>88</sup> The statement also illustrates the dominant role of elites in foreign policy-making, a point to which I will come back below.

Given that all social action is rooted in human agency, one wonders why the illusion of the state continues to remain the most commonly used aggregate in the discipline of international relations. One explanation of this apparent paradox can be found when regarding the human impulse to establish groups. Since the dawn of time, individuals confederate and form tribes, communities, societies, and states that give rise to collective action. Collective actions by definition are actions that are attributed to entire groups or communities. Legitimised to act in the name of the collectivity, the individual makers of collective actions tend to escape from the analytical nets of social scientists. Adding to this, in the realm of foreign and defence policy, nation-states present their policies mostly as unified positions. In contrast to domestic politics in democratic states, where decisions are claimed by the governing majority and the opposition assumes the role of the “alter”, foreign policy is directed towards an object outside the national boundaries. Put differently, the principal alter in relation to which ego defines its identity and produces new ideas is not reflected in the mirror of partisanship but situated outside the demos.<sup>89</sup> The primary discursive point of reference shifts from the party or coalition to the nation. This subtle shift in terminology affects the perception of agency. In addition, convenience and the discipline’s established practices and beliefs have surely played their parts in perpetuating the state-centric view in international relations (Schafer 2003, 173).

In the case of France, the powerlessness of Parliament in defence matters seems to make redundant the impact of domestic controversies on foreign policy decision-making and creates the impression that a ‘state as unitary actor’ approach may be sufficient for understanding foreign policy. Why should we bother with domestic contestations of foreign policy, if in the end the executive decides? However, the

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<sup>88</sup> ‘*Je représente la France, avec les ministres qui m’accompagnent – nous sommes, ici, la France – et je dois me mettre au rang souhaité par mes compatriotes pour les représenter*’ (Hollande 2012h).

<sup>89</sup> This is not to say that no differences in opinion exist within a given society regarding the conduct of the nation’s foreign policy.

contestation of opinions is not confined to the auras of the *Palais Bourbon*<sup>90</sup> and the *Palais Luxembourg*<sup>91</sup>. The executive is not immune from cleavages, and diverging opinions persist even among like-minded people working towards a common end. As a close observer of French security policy notes, ‘There is one official position, but within the French executive there are rather different visions’.<sup>92</sup> This make me agree with Lequesne (forthcoming) who argues that ‘one must not mythologize the unitary nature of states in the shaping of foreign policies’. Fragmentation between the different decision-units is a regular feature of the foreign policy-making process. The drivers of state action are individuals and groups of individuals. Collective action and what is generally known as national interest emerge from a process during which competing interpretations, advanced and defended by the various actors, struggle for symbolic dominance (Bigo 2011, 248). As a matter of course, it is not feasible to account for the behaviour of the total number of individuals that constitute a given state or society. Even micro-foundational social research is liable to a considerable degree of reduction. But self-reinforcing inequalities, which are part of all social orders (Lebow 2008, 4; Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962, 156), make it possible to limit the analytical focus to a smaller number of individuals.

The literature on foreign policy analysis and sociological approaches to the state has discussed the role of state elites at length. Sasley, who proposes a methodological and epistemological framework that allows for the systematic inclusion of emotions into the study of international relations, argues that ‘policy ideas attributed to a “state” are in fact often symbolized by an individual or a small group of individuals who are the “most important representatives of the ideas”’ (Sasley 2011, 467). In their seminal work *L’acteur et le système*, Crozier and Friedberg (1992 [1977], 24) claim that those who ‘by virtue of their situation, their resources or their capacities ... are able to control [the agenda-setting], use their power to impose themselves upon others’. Snyder agrees that ‘state action is the action taken by those acting in the name of the state’ (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962, 65). Since leaders are both ‘decision-makers and group members’ they can claim to ‘represent and speak for a given identity group’. Their importance is enhanced by being ‘cultural bearers’ (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962, 156)

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<sup>90</sup> The official seat of the National Assembly.

<sup>91</sup> The official seat of the Senate.

<sup>92</sup> Isabelle Lasserre, journalist at *Le Monde*, interview by author, Paris, 23 August 2013. ‘*Il y a une position officielle, mais il y a des visions assez différentes au sein de l’exécutif français*’.

or ‘high identifiers with the group’ (Sasley 2011, 468), or else they would not become leaders in the first place. In turn, their representative power allows state elites to discursively construct ‘the principles governing our daily lives’ (Woods 2006, 51). In other words, some actors in the system are elevated to the ranks of representatives of the larger *demos* in the name of which they claim to speak and act. To explain the paradox of the mandatory dominating the mandator, it has been argued that without the representatives and their symbolic actions there was no group; hence, their dominant role in society (Bourdieu 1987, 186).<sup>93</sup>

In the realm of security and defence policy, inequalities among subjects are particularly pronounced, and only a few can be considered as accepted voices of security (Buzan, Waever, and Wilde 1998, 31). The average citizens know very little about ‘the internal rules of the game’, which bars them from participating in most meaning-giving actions (Bigo 2011, 246). Instead, policy-making processes are usually handled by a small circle of leaders and specialists who enjoy a high degree of ‘elite autonomy’ in their daily work (Cerny 1980, 111). Processes of securitisation are not an open playing field freely accessible to everyone, but rather ‘structured by the differential capacity of actors to make socially effective claims about threats’ (Williams 2003, 514). The exclusive character of foreign and security policy makes a strong case for focusing on those elites that dominate the field. A restricted group of political, administrative, and military elites has a more immediate bearing on processes and outcomes than any other fraction of society. The focus on these foreign policy elites offers several methodological

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<sup>93</sup> On this point see also the debates in the literature on principal-agent theory (Moe 1984; McCubbins and Schwartz Thomas 1984; Pollack 2006). More recently, this elite-centric approach common to the majority of studies on role theory and national identities has been criticised. Cantir and Kaarbo (2012, 6) ask ‘why foreign policy elites can stand for the entire country’. I would respond with Bourdieu and argue that state elites create and construct the necessary material and symbolic resources that legitimate their position at the apex of the societal hierarchy. In contrast to the assumptions made by the democratic theory of the state, elites do not emerge from the organisation of civil society who delegates them. Instead, they have constructed the necessary institutional resources that legitimate them to speak in the name of the entire society and to decide what is good for everyone. As any other group, state elites pursue individual and collective (to their group) interests, which they label as societal interests (Bourdieu 2012, 59–61). According to Tilly (1985, 171) states are comparable to racketeers. Both create threats in order to ‘charge for [their] reduction’. The underlying critical agenda to which this statement alludes is evident. Individuals join a community to escape the Hobbesian anarchy characterised by perpetual anarchy, low life expectancy, and eternal threats. In exchange, they accept other threats that are not directed towards them as individuals, but rather towards the community of which they are part. However, to conclude from this observation that societies are helpless victims controlled by malicious elite groups that create threats at their discretion goes too far. Political elites are as much part of society as any other member and, thus, subject to the very same societal dynamics and socialisation processes. While the relationship among subjects is neither equal nor dominance-free, ‘securitization can never only be imposed’ and it also needs to be accepted by the audience (Buzan, Waever, and Wilde 1998, 23, 31). The entire process is as much about coercion as it is about consent.



and practical advantages (Duffield 1999, 794–95).<sup>94</sup> First, foreign policy elites are well-defined—although particularly difficult to penetrate (Hertz and Imber 1995, viii)—groups whose attitudes and beliefs are relatively well known when compared to the broader population. Second, ‘political leaders and policymakers have often quite sophisticated and complex political belief and value systems’ (Duffield 1999, 794–95) that are generally coherent and thus suitable for structured analysis.

Elite-centred approaches do not directly account for the role of non-governmental and civil society actors. However, given the elitist nature of French foreign policy, this analytical choice should not lead to distortions of the overall picture (Parsons 2000; Chafer 2005, 20; Bovcon 2012, 97; Koepf 2013a, 51, footnote 103). Outside experts rarely have direct access to French state elites, nor are they extensively consulted during policy-making processes.<sup>95</sup> In the words of Prunier (1995, 285), who himself served for a while as an academic expert in the Defence Ministry, ‘being an outside expert carries no political weight whatever. Experts are like a bouquet of flowers, pleasant and decorative to have around, but definitely not integrated in a politician or civil servant’s view of how to make decisions’. Lobbyist groups continue—although less than in the past—to be considered an ill-reputed Anglo-Saxon invention. Elected French decision-makers do pay attention to public opinion and the domestic political dimension of their foreign policy decisions. However, it seems that beyond the barometer of public opinion, the broader population’s influence on France’s security policy is rather limited. Adding to this, French policy-making in francophone Africa is not among the major interests of the French population either (Bakong 2012, 44).<sup>96</sup> Finally, it also depends on the nature and the scope of the military mission that defines to what extent decision-makers listen to public-opinion indicators. As one civil servant stated when comparing the interventions in Mali and the CAR, ‘In the case of Mali, this question [of consulting public opinion] did not emerge, because we had to intervene, but in the case

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<sup>94</sup> The definition of foreign policy elites (also referred to as elites, or state elites) proposed here includes politicians, civil servants, and military personnel with a decisional portfolio (e.g., chiefs of the military staff, military advisors to the president or the ministers).

<sup>95</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 27 January 2014.

<sup>96</sup> Pierre Lellouche, MP, interview by author, Paris, 7 February 2014. However, it should be noted that the influence of public opinion on foreign policy decision-making remains an understudied question in foreign policy research. The relationship is complicated and constraints caused by public opinion may be more relevant than often assumed (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 11–12). Some scholars have argued that one must distinguish between public opinion and perceived public opinion. Elites are said to rely on their perceptions of public opinion shaped by pre-existing beliefs and their respective sources of information rather than on public opinion per se (Robinson 2002, 3).

of the CAR the anticipation of public opinion by the policy-makers determines the choices that are made'.<sup>97</sup>

### 3.2 French Foreign Policy-Makers

French foreign policy can be defined as an elitist, static, and rather homogenous sub-field of the French state. The *grands corps de l'État* (grand corps of the state) are recruited by means of public *concours* (qualifying examinations). The majority of senior officials attended one of the nation's *Grandes Écoles* (elite universities), such as the *École Nationale d'Administration* (ENA), the *Écoles Normales Supérieures*, the *École Polytechnique* and/or went to *SciencesPo*, before entering public service. This model of state corporatism promotes the establishment of castes and tends to favour intellectual uniformity over diversity.<sup>98</sup> It also extends to the political sphere, although there the educational and sociological profiles are usually more diversified (Michon and Behr 2013).<sup>99</sup> Both President François Hollande and Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius as ENA graduates typify the traditional career path of public servants and politicians in France.

To identify the interactions among the members of this small group, the first step consists of introducing the core actors responsible for the decisions under examination. Two questions about the actors need to be addressed: (1) What types of actors make foreign policy decisions? (2) What is the effect of these decision-units on the resulting foreign policy? (Hermann 2001, 47). In the discussion that follows, decision-units that are situated at the top of the hierarchy are referred to as individuals and

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<sup>97</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014. '*Dans le cas du Mali il n'y a pas eu à se poser beaucoup de question, parce qu'il fallait intervenir, mais dans le cas de la RCA l'anticipation par les responsables politique de l'opinion publique est déterminante dans les choix qui sont faits*'.

<sup>98</sup> To illustrate this point: Former managing director of the African Department at the *Quai d'Orsay* and renowned expert of the Sahel region, Laurent Bigot, was discharged from his position shortly after the beginning of the military intervention in Mali. While the definitive reasons for this move remain unknown, pundits agree that his non-compliant way of thinking and non-hierarchical approach to the organisation of his department did not fit well with the uniformity and hierarchy that defines the institutional landscape. Others consider his ferocious critique of the state of Mali's democracy and his accusations against the ruling elite in Bamako, which he formulated during a conference in June 2012, as an additional reasons for his dismissal (Interview with a researcher at the French Ministry of Defence, Paris, 19 December 2013, see also Hugué (2013)).

<sup>99</sup> The cultural/educational capital symbolised by the *grandes écoles* is progressively decreasing in the political sphere. However, in the Ayrault cabinet still 28 per cent of the cabinet members graduated either from *SciencesPo* or ENA, compared to 41 per cent in the 1986 Chirac cabinet (Michon and Behr 2013, 336–37)

by their names and positions. For the president, the minister of foreign affairs, and the minister of defence, that is the *decisional triangle* (see below), the different subsections introduce first the respective offices and then their holders. Ideas that are issued throughout the decision-making process can be traced back to these individuals in question.<sup>100</sup> For all other decision-units, the aggregate of the small group is maintained. Besides the limits imposed by the available data, the distinction between the different levels is maintained, because only elected state elites at the top of the hierarchy are accepted as the ultimate and legitimate representatives of the state.<sup>101</sup> Their persons and their functions conflate. Therefore, I consider it indispensable to pay attention to both the role of the office and the personality of the office holder. The farther one descends the institutional hierarchy, the less it is possible—or necessary—to establish a direct link between individual appreciations and the observable outcome. While it is feasible to attribute a specific evaluation of the situation to a president or a minister by drawing on the available discursive data, it is more difficult to identify individual policy advisors and desk officers with a specific idea. Thus, at the subordinate levels of the institutional apparatus the aggregate of the small group is the closest outside observers can get to their subjects.

### 3.2.1 Le Président de la République

Two leadership traditions inhere in the Fifth Republic's political system—personal and parliamentary leadership. Together, these legacies of French history have led to the creation of a semi-presidential system with a dual executive and shared powers between the president and the prime minister (Elgie 2005, 70–72).<sup>102</sup> Notwithstanding the dualistic character of the Fifth Republic, there exists a *de facto*

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<sup>100</sup> Let me strike a note of prudence regarding the attribution of ideas to individual decision-makers. Statements by the president or a minister combine as we saw above personal traits and institutional or societal elements. Two differentiate between these two dimensions remains a major challenge of foreign policy analysts and a largely unresolved puzzle.

<sup>101</sup> One may consider the case of an ambassador whose mandate is the representation of the state, but who cannot advance a view in opposition to the elected political leaders and at the same time claim to speak in the name of the state.

<sup>102</sup> Prior to the Fifth Republic, France's monarchs and Napoleon incarnated the personal leadership tradition. Parliamentary leadership characterised the Third and Fourth Republics. However, as Hagan (2001, 25) shows, French decision-making in light of WWI was the most cohesive of all European powers and President Poincaré was able to exercise strong presidential authority.

hierarchical order which makes the president ‘the main political actor in the regime’ (Gaffney 2010, 5). Presidential authority is particularly prominent in the realms of foreign and defence policy, where policies are inextricably linked to the person and personality of the president.<sup>103</sup>

France is unique in Europe with regard to the autonomy the political system grants to the president and the velocity of decision-making processes in the realms of foreign and defence policy. The final decision on whether or not the French Army will intervene in another country comes always down to one person. Given this high degree of presidential autonomy in the realms of foreign and defence policy, it is no surprise that existing studies of French-African relations have shown considerable interest in the role of the French president. Titles such as *La politique africaine de Jacques Chirac* (Bourmaud 1996), *Chirac and la Françafrique* (Chafer 2005), *Nicolas Sarkozy ou la Françafrique décomplexée* (Foutoyet 2009), or *French relations with sub-Saharan Africa under President Sarkozy* (Moncrieff 2012) suggest the president’s preponderance in African matters, particularly if security and defence issues are at stake. Most studies, however, employ the French president as a chronological point of reference and concentrate largely on policy outcomes. Rarely do works engage in an actual analysis of the different decision-making units and the processes in the course of which identities emerge, preferences are shaped and choices made (see Cohen 1986; Gaffney 2010).

The presidential dominance in the constitutional design of the Fifth Republic follows from the collapse of the Fourth Republic, which was founded on the parliamentary leadership principle. As we saw in the first chapter, strong leadership became to be seen as a necessary condition to unite the country and reinforce France’s international standing and grandeur (Elgie 2005, 71–72). Charles de Gaulle, who took office in the course of the Algerian War to become the Fifth Republic’s first president, personified the ideal type of a charismatic and dominant decider. How de Gaulle interpreted and exercised the presidential mandate during the early phase of the Fifth Republic crucially shaped the collective perception of the role of the president and paved the way for his successors. Consequently, French

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<sup>103</sup> Interestingly, the concentration of power in the hands of a single person, to the point that some refer to the president as the Republic’s Zeus (Cohen 1986, 15–32) does not emerge from the Constitution itself. The presidential dominance in defence matters can be explained as a product of de Gaulle’s legacy (Irondele 2009, 121) and France’s history since the Second World War, and notably the wars in Indochina and Algeria, in the course of which the perception has developed that in times of crises rapid decision-making needs to take precedence over democratic deliberation (Cohen 1986, 16).

presidents to date have enjoyed a high degree of decisional autonomy in foreign affairs that can only be explained with reference to the practices initiated by de Gaulle and pursued by his successors.<sup>104</sup>

France's foreign and defence policies constitute the core of presidential exclusiveness (Chipman 1989, 117; 155). Although the notion of *domaine réservé* is mentioned in neither the Constitution nor any subsequent organic law, and thus has no legal basis, it has become an essential component of French leadership style. The concept of *domaine réservé* constitutes an interpretation of the presidential powers as stipulated in the 1958 Constitution. Established under the charismatic leadership of de Gaulle, the principle of presidential exclusiveness continues to regulate 'the relations within the executive, and between the executive and legislative' in foreign and defence matters (Kessler 1998, 24–25; Irondelle 2009, 120).

The most absolute expression of presidential power concerns the realm of defence policy. Originally intended as an effective decisional mechanism in case of a nuclear war, the notion *domaine réservé* has been interpreted as giving the president complete autonomy regarding the conduct of belligerent action. The decision to involve France in a military intervention abroad is incumbent on the president alone. As commander-in-chief, the president can take such a decision without the authorisation of any other constitutional body.<sup>105</sup> The autonomy of the French president, his undisputed decision-making authority, and his central position at the top of the system removed from party-political quarrels allow for decisions to be taken within the shortest possible time (Cohen 1986, 18). From the moment the president decides to deploy troops to another country, the first rapid deployment forces can be activated within a couple of hours.<sup>106</sup> French decision-makers proudly point to this exceptional institutional

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<sup>104</sup> The 1958 Constitution remains highly ambiguous on the precise competences it attributes to the president in the realm of defence policy. While it designates the president as the guarantor of national integrity (Constitution de la République française, art. 5), the commander-in-chief, and the only person to command France's nuclear weapons (art. 15), it—at the same time—puts the government in charge of the administration of the armed forces and makes the prime minister, not the president, responsible for the national defence (art. 20, 22). The government, presided by the prime minister, directs the policy of the nation and to do so has both the administration and the armed forces at its disposal (art. 20–21; Elgie 2013, 19–20). In practice, however, the since 1962 directly elected and, therefore, highly legitimised president can be considered as the primary initiator of foreign and defence policies.

<sup>105</sup> Since the constitutional reform in 2008, the government needs to *inform* Parliament within three days after having decided a military intervention. A debate can take place, but the decision is not due for parliamentary approval. Only if the operation exceeds the duration of four months, parliamentary approval is required (Constitution de la République française, art. 35).

<sup>106</sup> Interview with a personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014.

reactivity, which differentiates their country from all other European member states.

The president's position is further enhanced by the illusion of a national consensus on defence, fostered by speech acts and practices of parliamentarians regarding the norms, values, and orientations of foreign and defence policy (Irondelle 2009, 118; 130; Bourdieu 2012, 55–56). The following statement, which is a short extract from a personal conversation with the conservative Assemblyman Pierre Lellouche is representative of the prevailing thought among French elites regarding foreign military interventions: 'Although being in the opposition, we are not here to obstruct the consensus. We cannot hope the failure of this mission [Operation Serval]. We are here to assure that the operation is conducted in the best possible way, that the French Army possesses the necessary means to conduct this mission and that it receives the best possible support from Europe.'<sup>107</sup> Constitutionally not enabled to participate in the decision-making process on military interventions, Parliament's role is limited to a *posteriori* approval of a given operation.<sup>108</sup>

However, the opinions of parliamentarians are considered to represent or to influence public opinion, making the executive rather attentive to the reactions of Parliament. Although the 'war powers' of the French Parliament are generally classified as being 'very weak' (Dietrich, Hummel, and Marschall 2010, 64–66), an assembly of national representatives who are supportive of a military action strengthens both the legitimacy and the manoeuvring room of the executive. From the observation of a usually rather approving Parliament, the executive deduces that the general political culture across the French society approves and demands a country that is active on the international scene and resorts to the use of force in order to defend its proper values and ideas.<sup>109</sup> This deduction constitutes a clear act

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<sup>107</sup> Pierre Lellouche, MP, interview by author, Paris, 7 February 2014. '*Nous-mêmes, même dans l'opposition, on n'est pas là pour casser le consensus. On ne peut pas souhaiter l'échec de cette opération. On est là pour s'assurer que l'opération est menée le mieux possible, que l'armée française a les moyens de mener cette opération, quel reçoit le plus d'accompagnement possible de la part des Européens*'.

<sup>108</sup> More precisely, Parliament's role regarding the conduct of belligerent action is limited to the approval of military missions that exceed the duration of four months, the reflection, deliberation, and voting of the general organising principles of national defence and France's strategic orientations, and the annual voting of the defence budget. Parliament exercises its control function from the beginning of a military intervention by scrutinising the government's decisions by means of hearings. The regular hearings of the defence and the foreign ministers in front of parliamentary committees in addition to the weekly *Questions au Gouvernement* (questions to the government) are both indicators of how much support an ongoing military intervention receives and provide a feedback on which the executive can draw when considering future steps. For an introduction to the debate on the role of Parliaments in foreign policy decision-making, see Cantir and Kaarbo (2012, 13–14).

<sup>109</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014.

of universalising an elite culture.

Presidential power is more constrained during periods of cohabitation, which result from different returns in consecutive presidential and parliamentary elections. If the president's political party or coalition fails to secure the majority of seats in Parliament and, thus, remains in the opposition, the president still nominates a prime minister from the majority party or coalition.<sup>110</sup> In this case, a proactive prime minister can effectively downsize the president's role and powers. The consequence is a foreign policy based on the lowest common denominator on which the prime minister and the president can agree. Exceptionalism makes room for consensus (Charillon 2002, 925–26). Thus far, however, there have only been three periods of cohabitation since the beginning of the Fifth Republic.<sup>111</sup> Adding to this, cohabitation hardly affects the president's dominance in the *domaines réservés* (Irondele 2009, 129). François Hollande, although confronted with an extremely low popularity among his constituents, did not have to cope with the constraints provoked by political cohabitation when deciding on the interventions in Mali and the CAR.<sup>112</sup>

The president's dominant role in the French political system, however, does not imply that analyses should focus exclusively on presidential discourses and practices (Gallagher 2014). Such narrow approach would ignore the above-mentioned dependence of the president on subalterns, who use their expert knowledge in order to generate decisions favourable to their interests by biasing information that they feed into the system (Crozier and Friedberg 1992 [1977], 87–88).<sup>113</sup> Even in a semi-presidential

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<sup>110</sup> The president is free to nominate whoever he judges apt to exercise the office of the prime minister. The nominee does not need to be Member of Parliament, as the cases of Georges Pompidou, Raymond Barre, and Dominique de Villepin demonstrate. However, since the *Assemblée nationale*—at the occasion of the keynote address of a new government—can issue a censure motion by absolute majority and by doing so dispose the government, the prime minister relies on the majority in Parliament (Constitution de la République française, art. 49–50).

<sup>111</sup> Mitterrand – Chirac 1986-1988; Mitterrand – Balladur 1993-1995; Chirac – Jospin 1997-2002.

<sup>112</sup> The 2000 constitutional reform reduced the presidential term from seven to five years and adjusted the electoral calendar so that the presidential and parliamentary elections will succeed each other within a few weeks. Consequently, the probability that a president has to nominate a prime minister from the adverse party has become even smaller (Elgie 2013, 20–21). Some authors argue that the 2008 constitutional reform, which was intended to strengthen the role of the Parliament, above all strengthened the position of the majority, and thus, consolidated presidential powers even further (Elgie 2013). Former Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine testifies that during periods of cohabitation the role and the influence of the foreign minister is strengthened. Together with the minister of defence, the foreign minister defines the France's strategic orientations, and is not reduced to its usual role of issuing proposals (Védrine 2002, 868).

<sup>113</sup> The principal-agent literature discusses at length potential conflicts of interest between 'those who delegate authority (principals) and the agents to whom they delegate it' (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991, 5).

system that is noted for the dominant role that it accords to the president, decision-making can never be attributed to only a single actor, but is always the product of the interactions between multiple actors (Janis 1982; Irondelle 2011, 21). In other words, presidents do not take decisions in a complete vacuum. Socialised within a specific historical and political context, and assisted by their ministers and advisors, presidents are not outliers but representatives of society. Often, it is overlooked that a high degree of presidential autonomy in defence matters results in a large margin of manoeuvre of the military.<sup>114</sup> As experts on defence and security questions, the military considerably contributes to the framing of an issue. Thus, presidential decision-making is best understood as extensive small-group deliberation against the backdrop of a wider institutional, societal, and political context followed by a single person's decision.

Repeatedly François Hollande has been portrayed as a president who decides little or not at all—a maneuverer who waits for crises to ebb away (Biseau 2013). However, during both the Malian and the Central-African crises, Hollande demonstrated strong leadership by taking considerable political risks. During both crises, the president presented himself as a determined leader. At the same time, Hollande as a 'contextually responsive (more sensitive) leader[]' is said to 'have an increased tolerance for sharing of power' (Hermann et al. 2001, 91). In fact, the president's political advisors and the concerned bureaucracies benefitted from the president's collegial approach to decision-making. As shall be seen below, during both crises Minister of Defence Jean-Yves Le Drian enjoyed an exceptional high degree of autonomy, which would have been unthinkable for a minister under Hollande's goal driven predecessor Sarkozy.

### 3.2.2 Presidential Advisors

In the realm of French security policy towards Africa, there are three different, directly involved advisory bodies at the president's immediate disposal: the diplomatic advisor, the *conseiller Afrique* (advisor on African affairs), and the *chef d'état-major particulier du président de la République*

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<sup>114</sup> Didier Castres, vice chief of staff, interview by author, Paris, 18 February 2014.



(CEMP, chief of the military staff of the president). The diplomatic advisor is the president's first facilitator whenever an international crisis arises. If a crisis happens to occur on the African continent, the diplomatic advisor is seconded by the *conseiller Afrique*.<sup>115</sup>

The special role the African continent continues to play within France's foreign policy framework explains the existence of an advisory body briefing the president on issues exclusively related to the African continent. Since May 2012, the African desk, formerly *cellule africain* and symbol of France's unchallenged neo-colonial influence in the African *pré carré*, has been managed by Hélène Le Gal, a career diplomat who in many respects represents the antithesis of the traditional image of the *Monsieur Afrique* that applied to all her predecessors. She is assisted by Thomas Mélonio, a young economist who was in charge of development policies and the African continent during President Hollande's election campaign.<sup>116</sup> In addition, for all questions that necessitate a military evaluation the president can rely on the CEMP.

The diplomatic and the African desks at the Élysée are nodal points that remit information and briefing notes between the president and the administration, as well as the president's counterparts in other countries. They also filter and synthesise the information that reaches the president and prepare his discourses and state visits (Cohen 1986, 57). Their particular power lies in their proximity to the president. In their function as personal advisors, they possess an intimate knowledge of the president's mental maps and they thus know how to frame arguments and present options so that these stand a chance to survive the decisional process.<sup>117</sup> The special advisor on Africa at the Élysée is considered by many to be the most influential advisor in the French institutional system with regard to decision-making processes that concern the African continent.<sup>118</sup> Nonetheless, the African advisor shares her

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<sup>115</sup> Paul Jean-Ortiz (now defunct diplomatic advisor to Hollande during the crises in Mali and the CAR), a fluent Mandarin speaker who spent most of his diplomatic career in East Asia, was not an expert on Africa.

<sup>116</sup> The change in name from *cellule africaine* to *conseiller Afrique* is mainly of symbolic nature but comes along with a minor institutional change. The African advisor is not anymore directly responsible to the president, but the diplomatic advisor. More important in terms of reform, is the choice of Hélène Le Gal, not only the first woman to occupy this post but also a diplomat without a particular francophone African profile. Despite these changes, the two denominations continue to be used synonymously. What's more, the continuous existence of an advisory desk at the Élysée, dedicated to the African continent, which by the way is the only desk at the Élysée with a regional portfolio, is suggestive not only of France's special interest in that specific region of the world but also of a certain degree of continuity despite all rhetoric of rupture and reform (Baïetto 2012).

<sup>117</sup> Interview with a personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with a senior civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 18 July 2013; Interview with civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 3 February 2014. Other experts of French foreign policy contest this argument

powers with the president's diplomatic advisor and the CEMP.<sup>119</sup> The CEMP is the direct link between the president, the Ministry of Defence, and the chief of the military staff (*chef d'état-major des Armées*, CEMA). Similar to the diplomatic and African advisors, his function consists of briefing the president by synthesising the information that comes directly from the military, the secret services (*Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure*, DGSE), or the Ministry of Defence (Cohen 1986, 76). The CEMP is not responsible for the conduct of military operations, a task which falls under the responsibility of the CEMA. Like the diplomatic and African advisors, the CEMP is in permanent contact with the president, whom he sees on a daily basis. This proximity creates trust between the different persons and makes for the opinion of the CEMP carrying weight.<sup>120</sup> The CEMP, General of the Army Benoît Puga, is said to fully respect the presidential prerogative in military matters, and settles for advising the president and mediating between the latter and the military without excessively enforcing his personal opinion.<sup>121</sup>

Given the fact that few advisors have to handle a large number of issues, the president and his staff rely extensively on the bureaucratic apparatus to provide the necessary background information and expert knowledge that makes coherent and effective decisions possible (Balme 2009, 147). The military intervention in Mali and the decision to deploy a peacekeeping force to the CAR were developed in accordance with the CEMA, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the DGSE, the concerned embassies, and to lesser extent the Ministry of the Interior and the prime minister.

### 3.2.3 The Minister of Foreign Affairs

Always in the shadow of the president, the foreign minister supervises the *Quai d'Orsay* (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and France's diplomatic network. The minister's most appreciated quality

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(Jeanny Lorgeoux, senator, interview by author, Paris, 5 December 2013). In particular, when compared to the omnipotent role the *cellule africaine* had played in the past, especially under Jacques Foccart and later under René Journiac, Guy Penne, Jean-Christophe Mitterrand, Michel Dupuch or Michel de Bonnecorse, the office's present role may seem that of a mere mediator and contact point for the concerned ministries in France, the different African countries, and the French president. For an introduction to the storied person of Jacques Foccart and the role of the *cellule africaine* see (Foccart and Gaillard 1995; Bat 2012).

<sup>119</sup> Romain Nadal, former spokesperson of François Hollande, interview by author, Paris, 7 October 2013.

<sup>120</sup> Vincent Desportes, general in the French Army, interview by author, Paris, 12 January 2014.

<sup>121</sup> Romain Nadal, former spokesperson of François Hollande, interview by author, Paris, 7 October 2013.

is their loyalty to the president, to the point that at times one can speak of the foreign minister and the veritable foreign minister (i.e. the president) (Cohen 1986, 122). High-ranking public servants are traditionally favoured over argumentative parliamentarians for this post.<sup>122</sup> Traditionally, the minister's role is that of a loyal agent who devotedly executes the *monarch's* will. Whilst they can contribute with own ideas to the political debate, they should never publicly oppose the president. The *Quai d'Orsay* cannot impose its own policy. All credit of the minister's action goes to the president, while ministers can safely claim misjudgements for themselves. In sum, their portfolio is not the design of France's foreign policy but its execution. This said, under the Hollande presidency, 'the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs has recovered a major role in shaping France's approach to African relationships, rather than simply implementing a policy set in the Élysée palace' (Melly and Darracq 2013, 10). Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius aptly handled this new margin of manoeuvre and found the right balance between inserting new ideas into the decision-making process without imposing himself on the president.

Another handicap, related to the mandate of the foreign minister is the fact that the office does not possess any exclusive realm of competency, besides the management of its proper administration. For instance, external economic relations are shared with the prime minister and the minister of finance. Security and defence issues are shared with the minister of defence and—in theory—with the prime minister (Cohen 1986, 35–38). A case in point constitutes France's development assistance, which is a shared competence between the Ministry of Economy and Finance, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and the *Agence Française de Développement* (French Agency for Development, AFD) that produces a complex, costly, and time-consuming bureaucratic structure, and has led to sporadic calls for the re-establishment of a Ministry of International Cooperation (Sénat 2013, 442–47; Sénat 2013).<sup>123</sup> Successive foreign ministers have had to deal with the ambivalent role of the office, which places its

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<sup>122</sup> This statement requires some qualification. The case of Laurent Fabius confronts us with a charismatic and highly political figure that does not flinch from pronouncing possible disagreements with the president. Having said this, Fabius has been a loyal foreign minister, who—since in office—has not led any open conflicts with the president. His seniority and his experience as former prime minister contribute to the image of a wise public official who is more interested in fulfilling his mandate than preparing the next coup to boost his political career (Semo 2012; Mourgue 2013; Contenay 2014; Cabirol 2014; Fabius 2014e).

<sup>123</sup> Jeanny Lorgeoux, senator, interview by author, Paris, 5 December 2013.

holder in the unoccupied space between the president, the prime minister, and other concerned ministers (Védrine 2002, 877). Despite or because of these limitations, the minister of foreign affairs remains an indispensable element in the foreign policy apparatus. Due to the polyvalent nature of the mandate, the foreign minister possesses a global view on most issues, which makes them a crucial source of information and provides them with a certain margin of manoeuvre to advance their own proposals (Cohen 1986, 46).

The Ministry itself is structured hierarchically. Usually, explicit orders are given from the top. The information that is produced by the desk officers climbs up the hierarchal ladder and passes through the filters of the respective departments and the hands of the minister's personal staff before it reaches the minister. The regional and technical experts at the lower levels of the hierarchy are usually not involved in any of the deliberation processes. They provide briefing notes but most of the time do not receive any feedback and, consequently, do not know what actually happens to their work before they see the final outcome and recognise parts of their own research and advice within a given statement or discourse.<sup>124</sup>

However, as Samy Cohen (1986, 176) highlights, the geometry of power within the *Quai d'Orsay* is not fixed but continues to vary according to the respective minister in charge. In the wake of the military intervention in Mali, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius demonstrated a stringent and interfering internal governance style. A series of senior civil servants and specialists of the region, such as Elisabeth Barbier, Laurent Bigot, and Jean Félix-Paganon, were discharged from their posts—some on political grounds and others, as *Le Figaro* and other informed sources suggest, as a riposte to the perceived absence of the *Quai* in the wake of the sudden military intervention in Mali from which the Ministry of Defence emerged as the principal player next to the Élysée (Barluet 2013).

Like the president, the foreign minister can rely on a small number of personal advisors, which form the so-called *cabinet ministériel*. In the context of the military interventions in Mali and the CAR, the director of the *cabinet*, the vice-director, the policy advisor on political and military affairs, the policy advisor on relations with the UN, the intermediary between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the

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<sup>124</sup> Interview with senior civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 18 July 2013.

Ministry of Defence, as well as the African advisor, were involved in the preparatory work. In addition, the *Centre de Crises* (emergency operations centre), the Department for Relations with the UN, the *Centre d'Analyse, de Prévision et de Stratégie* (CAPS, policy planning staff), and most notably the *Direction de l'Afrique et de l'Océan Indien* (African Department), its director, vice-director, and the respective regional experts helped to prepare the Ministry's position. During both crises, the foreign minister established special task forces, which were coordinated by the African Department. In doing so, Laurent Fabius created the conditions favouring small-group decision-making within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These ad hoc task forces are composed of a restricted number of individuals and each has a very specific goal. Once they obtain their goals, they are dissolved (Hermann 2001, 60–61).<sup>125</sup>

On the political level, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius was assisted by Junior Minister for Development (ministre délégué) Pascal Canfin and Junior Minister for French Nationals Abroad and Relations with La Francophonie Yamina Benguigui. In particular in the aftermath of the military intervention in Mali, Pascal Canfin started to become a more dominant actor. As we shall see below, French decision-makers elaborated a three-legged solution to the political crisis in Mali, built on security, democracy promotion, and development. Pascal Canfin who directly reported to Laurent Fabius was responsible for the third leg and gained notably prominence during the preparation of an international donor conference for Mali which took place in May 2013. Since the government reshuffle in April 2014 the two junior Ministries have been merged and now belong to the portfolio of Secretary of State for Development and *La Francophonie* Annick Girardin.

### 3.2.4 The Minister of Defence

The nodal point between the military and the government is the Ministry of Defence. Consequently, the defence minister's role is to mediate between civilian and military perspectives during all emerging or ongoing crises that have a military dimension. The Ministry is composed of both military staff and civil

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<sup>125</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014.

servants. Next to the *cabinet ministériel*, the minister of defence supervises and is directly assisted by the CEMA, the secretary general of the administration, and the commissioner for armament. In times of crisis, only the *cabinet ministériel* and the CEMA, who possesses the necessary technical and operational expertise, are in constant interaction with the minister of defence. The remaining departments and subordinate institutions exercise auxiliary functions during the decisional and operational processes.<sup>126</sup>

French defence ministers as well find themselves in a somewhat unfavourable position, since they have no full control of their portfolio. Given that the president is the nation's commander-in-chief and the CEMA has the authority over all operational aspects, each minister needs to define their proper role they intend to play in the institutional set-up. Broadly speaking, this role searching is associated with three types of ministers.

First, there are those ministers for whom the office constitutes a political reward. They tend to be more interested in the prestige that comes along with the Ministry than in the Ministry itself. Then there are those ministers who have an interest in doing a thorough job but are prevented from playing a chief part, because either they lack the technical expertise or they are confronted with a president who prefers to have full control of this critical portfolio. In both cases, the minister of defence is usually excluded from the most important decisions. Finally, there are those ministers who are eager to exercise their function to the fullest and at the same time are endowed with the necessary autonomy by the president. This third case reflects the situation at the time of the crises in Mali and the CAR. Usually appearances in public are a good indicator for evaluating a minister's involvement in the decision-making process of a given crisis. From the very first day of Operation Serval, Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian publicly commented on the conduct of the mission. In contrast, Gérard Longuet, defence minister under Nicolas Sarkozy at the time of Operation Harmattan in Libya, had his first appearance in public only fifteen days after the mission had started.<sup>127</sup>

Jean-Yves Le Drian is described as being very close to the president. French media repeatedly highlighted the three decade-long friendship between the two. In contrast to Foreign Minister Laurent

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<sup>126</sup> Xavier Collignon, vice-director of the DAS, interview by author, Paris, 6 August 2013.

<sup>127</sup> Colonel Michel Goya, interview by author, Paris, 10 January 2014.

Fabius, who prior to his appointment happened to oppose Hollande on several occasions, at one instance calling the latter a *fraise des bois* (woodland strawberry; meaning something rather insignificant), Jean-Yves Le Drian has always enjoyed the president's full confidence.<sup>128</sup> During the cabinet reshuffle in April 2014, the current occupant of the *Hôtel de Brienne*<sup>129</sup> was proposed for the position of prime minister, which he refused (Cabirol 2014). In addition to his loyalty to the president, pundits and collaborators stress the minister's technical expertise.<sup>130</sup> In conjunction, these two traits make the minister of defence a dominant leader within the Ministry and an influential player in the decision-making framework. He enjoys a considerable autonomy, which puts him almost on equal parts with the President. The minister of defence transforms the guiding principles laid down by the President into actual policies.<sup>131</sup> The minister's leading role throughout the decision-making processes and the ensuing operations also happened at the cost of the CEMA. For starters, both the minister of defence and the CEMA can legitimately claim the role of the principal mediator between the political and the military realm. Their interaction determines to what extent the military influences politics respectively vice versa how thoroughly the political sphere controls the military. Although operational aspects belong to the area of competences of the CEMA, Jean Yves Le Drian expanded his competences and ventured out in the world of tactics and operational planning.<sup>132</sup> The minister's attempt to take control over the operational aspects of these two decisions augmented the tensions that naturally exist between the CEMA and the minister with regard to their respective competences. As a close advisor of the minister of defence confirms, 'the special relation that exist actually between the minister of defence and the president ... makes for the minister of defence being both the president's military and defence advisor.'<sup>133</sup> The CEMA at the time of the two interventions, Admiral Édouard Guillaud, on the other hand, was at best consulted and at worst simply ignored (Notin 2014, 145). This struggle for

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<sup>128</sup> This being said, Fabius became a loyal and widely appreciated foreign minister once he entered the Hollande government.

<sup>129</sup> The name of the seat of the Ministry of Defence.

<sup>130</sup> Isabelle Lasserre, journalist at Le Monde, interview by author, Paris, 23 August 2013.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the Minister of Defence, Paris, 27 January 2014.

<sup>132</sup> Camille Grand, director Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, interview by author, Paris, 23 July 2013; Vincent Desportes, general in the French Army, interview by author, Paris, 12 January 2014.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 16 September 2013. '*La relation particulière qu'il y a actuellement entre le ministre de la défense et le Président de la République fait qu'elle est très forte entre eux, et en gros le ministre de la défense est le conseiller militaire et le conseiller de la défense du Président de la République*'.

competences is also reflected in the more general reorganisation of the Ministry in the course of which civil servants have increasingly assumed responsibilities traditionally held by the military.<sup>134</sup>

### 3.3 Crisis-Management: An Interactionist Scheme of Decision-Making

According to political practice, decisions on foreign military interventions are taken in the *Conseil Restreint de Défense* (Restricted Defence Council),<sup>135</sup> which the president convokes in order to deal with issues that have or are expected to have serious implications for the nation's security (Code de la défense 2009, Art.R. \* 1122-3.). These meetings are presided by the president, and usually involve those ministers who are present in the ordinary Defence Council, close collaborators of the president, and experts on the issue or region under discussion (Code de la défense, Article R\*1122-3).<sup>136</sup> While the Restricted Defence Council has all the characteristics of a small group decisional environment, it is not an instance of collective decision-making. The Restricted Defence Council—by some referred to as ‘the president’s decisional chamber’<sup>137</sup>—constitutes an advisory board the purpose of which is to facilitate presidential decision-making. Both the military intervention in Mali and the decision to deploy a French peacekeeping force to the CAR were formally decided in Restricted Defence Council meetings on 11 January and 5 December 2013 respectively. However, as a close collaborator of President Hollande remarks, by the time of these final pre-decisional meetings ‘the decision has already been taken. There is no debate anymore, there may be a discussion, but that’s all’.<sup>138</sup>

The decision itself, that is, the relatively brief ‘moment of the making of action’ (Bigo 2011, 237),

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<sup>134</sup> Colonel Michel Goya, interview by author, Paris, 10 January 2014.

<sup>135</sup> Also referred to as *Comité de Défense Restreint*.

<sup>136</sup> The Restricted Defence Council is regulated by the decree establishing the *Conseil de la Défense et de Sécurité Nationale* (National Defence and Security Council), which defines the nation's strategic orientations regarding the ‘conduct of external operations [and] the planning of responses to major crises’ (Code de la défense 2009, Art.R. \* 1122-1.). The composition of the *Conseil Restreint* can vary but usually involves similar to those of the *Conseil de Défense et de Sécurité Nationale* the prime minister, the minister of defence, the minister of interior, the minister of economy, the minister of foreign affairs, and the minister in charge of the budget. Also present are the chiefs of the military staff, concerned diplomatic services, intelligence services, and any other person the president judges apt to contribute to the debate.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 5 February 2014. ‘...la chambre de décision du Président’.

<sup>138</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014.



is preceded by a longer period of extensive debates, where intra-institutional struggles and interactions between the actors come into play. From the perception of an issue as a potential security threat, to the framing, and the evaluation of different solutions, and finally the official decision weeks, months, and sometimes years elapse. As one colonel in the Ministry of Defence—asked since when the French government had been toying with the idea of intervening militarily in Mali—put it, ‘if you look at history, you will see that veritable surprises are rare. Situations evolve progressively, and the existing plans evolve along with them’.<sup>139</sup> For the French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius foreign policy comprises three principles, anticipation, influence, and coherence. Only anticipation can guarantee coherence, which is necessary to exercise influence in the world (Fabius 2012k).

The pre-decisional period is the time when subordinate actors exert their greatest influence on the decision to-be. In particular, at early stages of the decision-making process decision-makers depend heavily on the information gathered by the administrative services and departments. Irondelle (2011, 35), in his study on the reform of the French military, defined the relation between the president and the subordinate administrators as the authority/expertise ratio. Due to the increasing knowledge on a specific issue that decision-makers acquire during the process, the ratio between authority and expertise decreases. The more experience leaders gain on a specific issue, the less reliant they become on their advisors and external cues (Hermann et al. 2001, 100). Consequently, the control over the decision-making process shifts back to the top of the hierarchy as the decision approaches. The following account given by a presidential advisor makes this point clear.

First, it [my role] lies in informing the president, whom I usually inform by means of policy briefs. Today [March 2014], I write much less [policy briefs], because the president knows the situation [in Mali] very well; but at the beginning I wrote many. Apart from that, I brief the president on what is happening from a political or diplomatic standpoint, or I inform him about the interviews I had with persons from these countries. I also compile résumés of the documents prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of Defence.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Xavier Collignon, vice-director of the DAS, interview by author, Paris, 6 August 2013. ‘*Si vous regardez l’histoire, les vraies surprises elles sont peu nombreuses. Les situations évoluent progressivement, et à ce moment-là les plans qui existent évoluent avec elles*’. This long-term perspective of strategic thought is institutionalised in form of the *Centre de Planification et Contrôle des Opérations* (Centre for Operational Planning and Control, CPCO). The CPCO produces operational plans and options for all kinds of possible scenarios, which serve as technical basis for the following political decision. The option to intervene militarily in Mali and the CAR had been played through in detail by the CPCO prior to the presidential decision.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014. ‘*Déjà c’est l’information du Président que j’informe normalement par des notes, que je fais à mon propre initiative. Aujourd’hui je fais beaucoup moins, qu’au début, parce qu’aujourd’hui le Président connaît bien la situation, mais au début je faisais beaucoup. Si*

At each stage of the decision-making process, different actors have more or less influence. These actors range from the individual to the group. The decision-units framework identifies three types of actors: coalitions of autonomous actors, single groups, and predominant leaders.

Coalitions of autonomous actors (or autonomous coalitions) are defined as compounds of individuals or groups that shape the decision-making process through their input. Intra- and inter-institutional divergences are common and opinions are forged through mutual exchange, conflict, and interactions between actors belonging to different units. Agency is not concentrated within one institution or individual but shared. During early stages of the decision-making processes when first perceptions and opinions are shaped coalitions of autonomous actors dominate the decision-making process. A single group is a more restrictive small-group environment, where different individuals deliberate and decide over possible solutions.

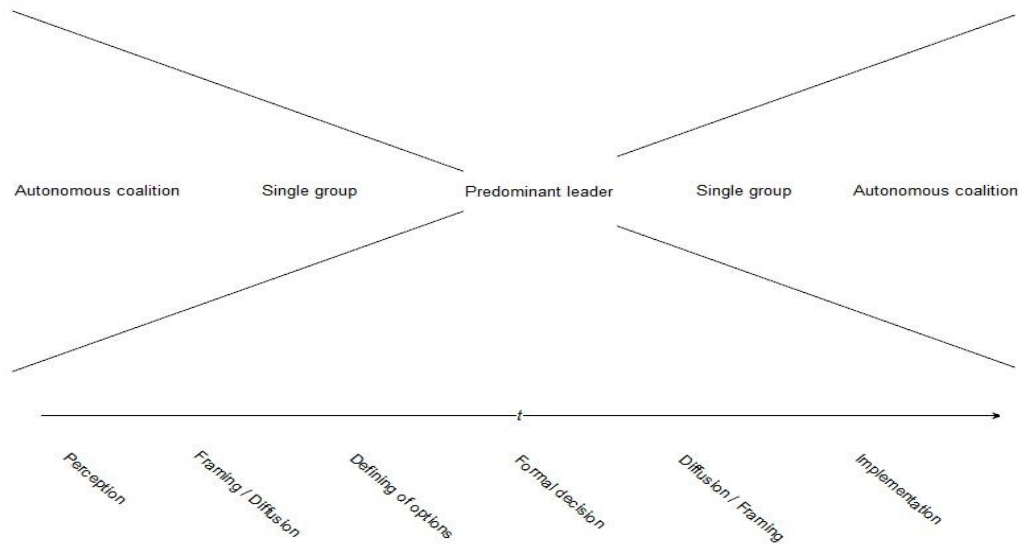
The *Conseil Restreint* is the typical example of a single group, as defined here. Actors belonging to a single-group attach importance to the fact that their actions are perceived as consensual. If differences between the members of a single group exist, usually they are not disclosed. This act of de-particularisation serves the purpose of officialising a specific opinion and thus creating a legitimised truism. By staging consensus during the final phase of the decision-making process, the universal character of a given decision shall be emphasised (Bourdieu 2012, 53–54). *We all agreed; hence, it has to be true!* Finally, the predominant leader is a ‘single individual who has the ability to stifle all opposition and dissent as well as the power to make a decision alone, if necessary’ (Hermann 2001, 56–57). All French presidents, independent of their personal traits and due to the institutional set-up and political practices, become predominant leaders at the moment of the decision. The motto *the buck stops here*—popularised by former US President Harry S. Truman—captures the president’s obligation to take on the ultimate responsibility and put an end to the deliberation process. In France, this is the case when the president says yes or no to a foreign military intervention.

At any given stage of the decision-making process, one or several decision-units get the upper hand.

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*non je l’informe de ce qui se passe d’un point de vue politique ou diplomatique, ou je lui rends compte des entretiens que j’ai eu avec des personnalités des pays. Je vois beaucoup de monde, moi. Ou alors je lui fais une synthèse des notes, des documents, qui sont réalisés par le ministère des affaires étrangères ou la défense.’*

While this process is in constant motion and a regular, clear-cut order does not exist, a general pattern can still be identified. A simplified scheme of the decision-making process in military matters in France resembles a double-funnel that narrows as the moment of the making of action approaches and widens again during the implementation phase (see fig. 2).

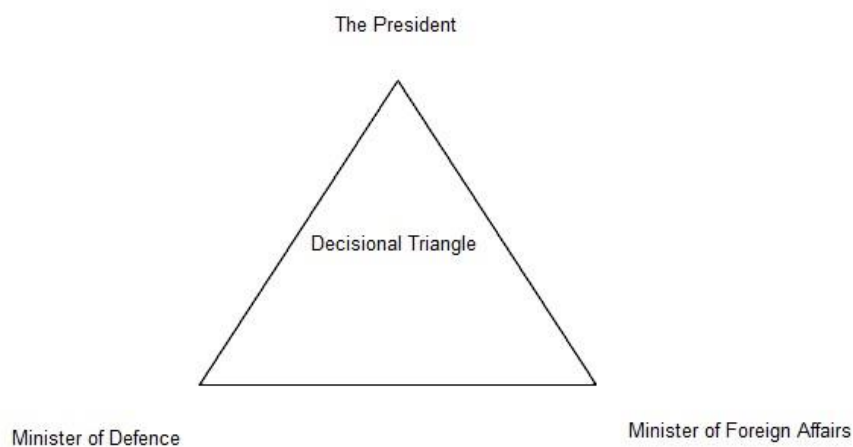


**Figure 2. Schematic illustration of the different stages of the decision-making process and the predominant decision-unit at each of these stages**

*Source:* own elaboration

The decision to deploy French troops to a foreign country is taken by an individual, the president, after intensive discussion with the defence minister, the foreign minister, and the military and diplomatic advisors. This penultimate phase of decision-making, that is the consultations and interactions of a single group, is described here as a decisional-triangle (see fig. 3). The president is situated at the top of the triangle and the defence and the foreign ministers occupy the two lower edges. The two lower edges are not necessarily situated at the same level. Depending on the influence of the respective minister and the issue at stake either the minister of foreign affairs or the minister of defence are closer to the president. Regarding the military interventions in Mali and the CAR, the increasing influence of the Ministry of Defence when compared to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a noteworthy although debated point. Some observers assert that the actual decision to intervene in Mali was taken at the Ministry of Defence, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was largely excluded from the decision-making process. Champions of this argument point to the preparatory meetings, which usually took

place at the Ministry of Defence and not at the *Quai*.<sup>141</sup> This trend was particularly visible during the decision-making phase of Operation Serval. In line with the definition of a single group presented above, the official version denies any divergences between the two ministers. Senior officials in both ministries, however, when questioned off the record, confirm that—given the friendship that joins François Hollande and Jean-Yves Le Drian, as well as the military nature of the two crises—the Ministry of Defence was in control during most phases of the problem solution acting as the president’s principal military and defence advisory unit.<sup>142</sup>



**Figure 3. Decisional triangle depicting the interactions between the most important decision-makers in France in the realm of defence policy**

*Source:* own elaboration

However, the different perceptions of the respective roles of the two ministers cannot only be attributed to bargaining games among them. The portfolio of his office put the minister of foreign affairs in charge of promoting the French position among France’s international partners. The defence minister, on the other hand, is more implicated in the operational dimension of the crisis resolution.<sup>143</sup> The nature of the tasks of the Ministry of Defence allows for more prominent media appearances than those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The former reports on all military aspects of an ongoing campaign, announces casualties, honours soldiers, and presents images of the enemy and the field. The diplomatic

<sup>141</sup> Isabelle Lasserre, journalist at Le Monde, interview by author, Paris, 23 August 2013.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 16 September 2013; Interview with civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 5 February 2014.

<sup>143</sup> Romain Nadal, former spokesperson of François Hollande, interview by author, Paris, 7 October 2013.

work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the other hand is rather imageless, reinforcing the impression of the foreign minister being excluded from the most crucial steps of the decision-making process.<sup>144</sup>

Interestingly, the prime minister, who according to articles 20 and 22 of the French Constitution is responsible for the national defence, seems to have played no significant role during the decision-making process. In contrast to what is suggested in the 2008 White Book on Defence (2008, 253–54) his presence at the meetings of the *Conseil Restreint* was a mere constitutional formality. None of my interlocutors mentioned former Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault as an active decision-maker during the process. The then Minister of the Interior and current Prime Minister Manuel Valls was evoked at several occasions as having participated in all meetings of the *Conseil restreint* and having shown a considerable interest in both missions and their *retour en sécurité intérieure* (impact on the national security).<sup>145</sup> However, he only played a little role in the actual making of the decision.<sup>146</sup>

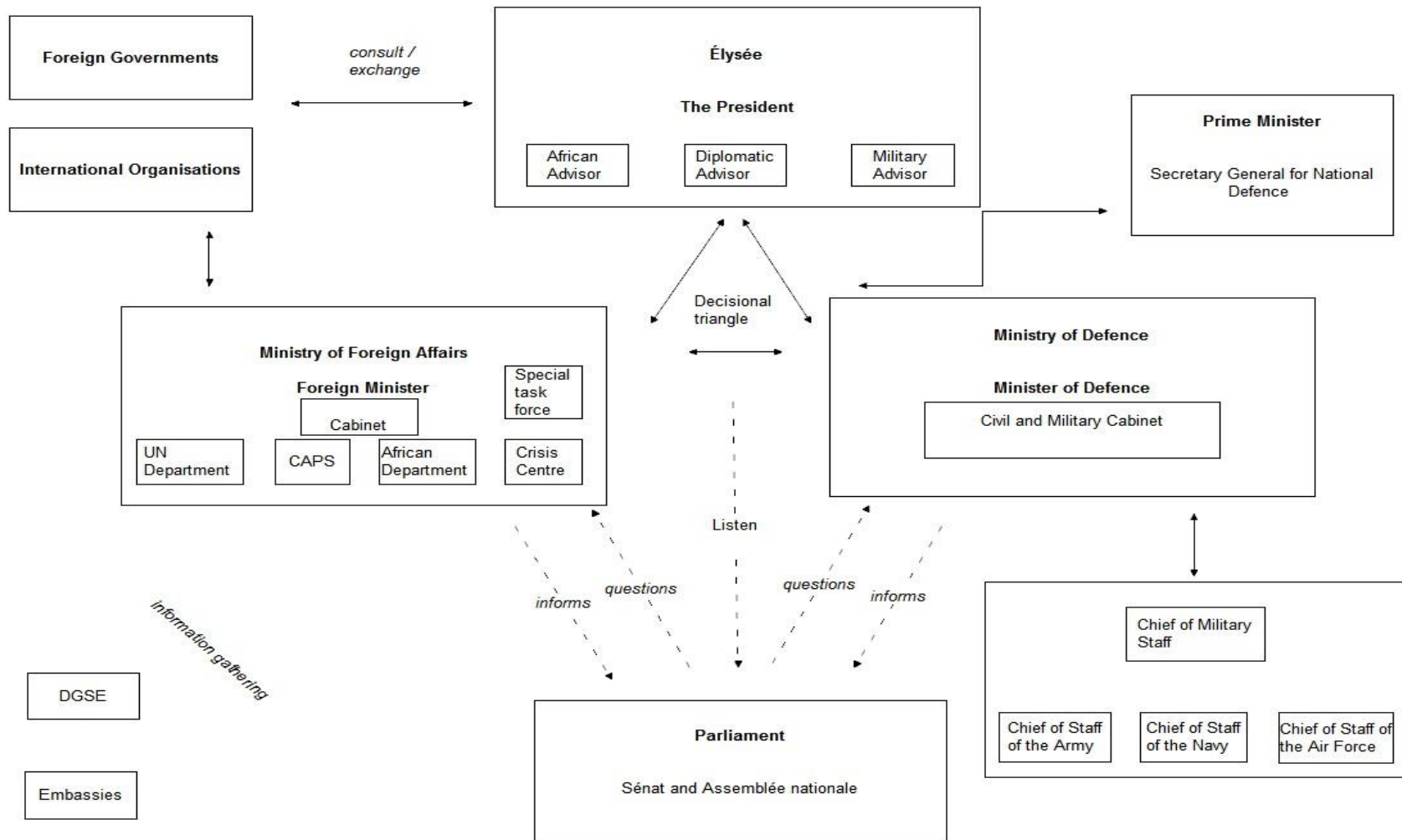
The diagrammed illustrations of the decisional process and the interactions between the three core actors in the French political system (fig. 2 and fig. 3) do not depict the auxiliary decision-units, which, as we saw above, play a crucial role in particular during the preliminary stages of the decision-making process as well as during the implementation phase. To account for the importance of these subordinate decision-units, figure 4 disregards the temporal dimension of the process and shows an ichnography of the central decision-units and their interactions.

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<sup>144</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014.

<sup>145</sup> This concept implies that every security policy France implements abroad needs to contribute to the domestic security as well. For instance, the concept forces decision-makers to reflect on whether or not a military intervention increases the possibility of a terrorist attack on national territory. Vice-versa domestic security is not limited to the national territory but involves actions beyond the borders.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of the interior, Paris, 12 February 2014.



**Figure 4. Ichnography of the French decision-making process in defence matters**

*Source:* own elaboration, based on practices and the actors' subjective political interpretation of the institutional set-up.

### 3.4 Conclusion

Based on the actors' subjective interpretations of their work, this chapter has provided a sociological account of the decision-making environment and processes in the realm of defence policy. Starting from the formal institutional set-up, the different sections have introduced the central decision-units and explained how decision-makers perceive and understand their respective roles within the institutional environment. An evolving interactionist scheme has been depicted that attributes different degrees of autonomy and influence to either coalitions of autonomous actors, small groups, or individuals depending on the specific stage of the process (see fig. 2). Contingent on the respective stage of the decision-making process, different decision-units came to the forefront during the decision-making processes on Mali and the CAR.

While confirming the French president's exceptional autonomy in the realm of defence policy, the chapter has challenged the conventional wisdom according to which presidential decision-making happens in a vacuum, making the president the sole actor. Based on the arguments developed above, I consider the following definition of presidential power by Allison a suited description of the decisional-environment in France during the Hollande Presidency.

In status and formal powers the President is chief. Every other participant's business somehow involves him. But his authority guarantees only an extensive clerkship. If the President is to rule, he must squeeze from these formal powers a full array of bargaining advantages. Bolstered by his "professional reputation" and "public prestige," the President can use these advantages to translate the needs and fears of other participants into an appreciation that what he wants of them is what they should do in their own best interest. (Allison 1971, 148)

Thanks to the interactionist model presented here, it will become possible to attribute some of the ideas that informed the decision-making process to specific individuals or groups. In so doing, the model counteracts the tendency of many constructivist approaches to compile discursive data for a given state without further differentiating between the units concerned. The model avoids portraying ideas as a common property equally shared by all social strata. Accordingly, the state is not understood as an individual homogenous unit, but as a field within which actors shape actions.

This is not to deny the existence of some fundamental, intersubjectively shared values and norms, which I described in the previous chapter under the notion of political culture. However, the application of these guiding principles still lies in the hands of a small group of actors. Actors and ideas are

inseparable: to understand the one, one must understand the other.

In the following, the theoretical framework laid out in this and the previous chapters will be applied to two ‘occasions for decision’ (Hermann et al. 2001). The analysis begins with the Malian crisis and the French response to it, before it then examines the decision to deploy a peacekeeping force to the CAR. Chapters Four and Five trace the processes in both cases and identify the most salient ideational variables that account for the two decisions.



# Chapter Four

## Securitising Mali: No Free Ride for Terrorists in Francophone Africa

*Il n'a, à aucun moment, été envisagé l'envoi de troupes françaises au Mali.*

—Christian Rouyer

*Il n'y aura pas d'hommes au sol, pas de troupes françaises engagées... Nous ne pouvons pas intervenir à la place des Africains. On peut donner un appui matériel, on peut former, mais la France n'interviendra pas.*

— François Hollande

*J'ai, donc, au nom de la France, répondu à la demande d'aide du président du Mali appuyée par les pays africains de l'Ouest. En conséquence, les forces armées françaises ont apporté cet après-midi leur soutien aux unités maliennes pour lutter contre ces éléments terroristes.*

— François Hollande



**Figure 5. Mali, borders, rivers, principal cities**

Source: [http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num\\_car=14044&lang=de](http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=14044&lang=de), accessed on 17 July 2014

In 2012, the security, political, and humanitarian crises that smouldered in Mali reached new heights. The presence of Islamist extremist groups in the arid north of the country transformed a domestic political conflict and regional insurgent movement into an issue with global reach. The international response to the deteriorating situation in Mali consisted in supporting the interim government in Bamako and setting up a multilateral intervention force to restore order in the country (UN Resolutions 2056, 2071, 2085). The French administration took the lead role in the UN Security Council, becoming the strongest proponent of an African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). All along, French foreign policy elites described their country's role as that of a "facilitator" providing logistical and financial assistance as well as diplomatic support. The motto "African solutions to African security problems" was the thread that ran through all official declarations (Fabius 2012f; Fabius 2012m). Despite the repeated attestations of unconditional solidarity with the interim government in Bamako, there was no mention of French soldiers intervening directly in the conflict until events in early January 2013 provoked a major shift in France's position. Following the *Anṣār ad-Dīn*-led offensive towards the government-controlled south, Mali's interim President Dioncounda Traoré issued a written request for French military assistance.<sup>147</sup> On 11 January 2013, François Hollande announced that, in the name of France, he had given the order to launch a counter-offensive against Islamist fighters and criminal groups that threatened the existence of the Malian state (Hollande 2013f). By early February 2012, 4,500 French soldiers were taking part in the military operation code-named *Serval*.

The drastic shift from a no-boots-on-the-ground policy to France's largest military intervention since the Algerian War is puzzling to say the least (Notin 2014, 123–48; Notin and Blanchard 2013). How and why did French decision-makers make this shift? Is the French government's U-turn over the conflict an expression of ad hoc policy-making or rather a gradual adjustment to an evolving situation? What motivated French decision-makers to intervene in Mali? Examining France's reaction to the crisis in Mali, Melly and Darracq (2013, 6) argue that 'Hollande rapidly came to view the Mali crisis and the wider threat that it posed to West African and international security as his biggest policy challenge outside Europe'. They specify that Hollande's evaluation was that the conflict in Mali affects French

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<sup>147</sup> There are several unconfirmed speculations around this letter that constituted the principal source of legitimisation for the military intervention. Some pundits claim that French officials edited the final version of the letter. Others argue that the letter was written in Paris in the first place.

national interest, ‘because it might enhance the capacity of Islamist terrorists to stage attacks in France and because the disintegration of Mali’s territorial integrity and constitutional government imperilled the stability of West Africa’ (Melly and Darracq 2013, 8). In an attempt to demystify the French decision to launch Operation Serval, the present chapter engages with the ideas and motivations that emerged during the decision-making process. This chapter begins with a background note on the political and security situation in Mali on the eve of the French intervention. The remaining sections analyse the different stages of the decision-making process: the inclusion of the Malian crisis on the French security agenda, the framing and diffusion phase, and the final decision. Together these sections show how and why, in the course of the decision-making process, the problem solution shifted from “supporting a multilateral peacekeeping force” to a “unilateral intervention in the name of the international community”. Each section sheds light on the actors’ mental maps and the ideational variables that informed the decision-making process at the respective stages.

The empirical findings suggest that French decision-makers are trapped between two contradictory principles. On the one hand, France’s reluctance to intervene unilaterally in one of its former colonies was rooted in the policy-makers’ determination to put an end to their country’s negative reputation as an avaricious neo-colonial power that remains stuck in the clutches of its own history. On the other hand, the French political elite was convinced of the necessity of military intervention from early on. If one considers decision-making processes as the struggle between principles and concepts, the outcome shows that the second principle won out when François Hollande announced the beginning of Operation Serval in January 2013. The perceived proximity and responsibility towards France’s former African colonies explain the readiness of decision-makers to accept the considerable risk entailed with a foreign military intervention. Not only did pro-intervention arguments speak to the core principles and values of French policy-makers’ identity and self-understanding; they were also reconcilable with France’s commitments to a multilateral security policy and the norm of international humanitarian interventionism providing legitimacy and preventing France from being accused of satisfying its neo-colonial appetite.

## 4.1 Mali, Scene of a Long-lasting Crisis

As sudden as the advances of armed groups in early January 2013 may have seemed, the outbreak of the political and security crisis in Mali did not appear out of nowhere. The decision by several armed groups to advance towards the south of the country, overrunning Malian Army outposts and prompting the French military response, simply constituted a new degree of intensity in a crisis that had haunted the region since the mid-2000s. To introduce the case, the following three sub-sections provide an overview of the various dynamics that led to the weakening of the Malian state and allowed militant extremists to establish themselves in the northern part of the country.

### 4.1.1 Socio-Economic and Political Factors

The playing field on which the actors of the Malian crisis confronted each other featured a crumbling political system combined with a weak socio-economic environment. Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world. Poverty remains a serious issue in rural areas, where the majority of Mali's populace lives (van Vliet 2013, 143). Mali and its neighbouring countries occupy the bottom end of the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) league table, the exception being Algeria (see table 1).<sup>148</sup> With a population of 14.5 million and a territory of over 1.2 million square kilometres (roughly twice the size of France) Mali performs worse than the average of the region in terms of human development (HDI of 0.344; rank 182/186). The only two neighbouring states that fall behind Mali on the HDI index are Burkina Faso (183/186) and Niger (186/186).

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<sup>148</sup> The HDI takes into consideration both social and economic development indicators by accounting for life expectancy, educational attainment, and income. The aggregate value for "Mali and its neighbouring countries" is below the aggregate values for "sub-Saharan Africa" and "least developed countries", even if Algeria is included in the calculation. A look at Mali's growth rates suggests the existence of a rather stable economy, which grew by 5 per cent in 2012 (Penney 2013). Despite these positive macro indicators, Mali's economy remains fragile for the reason that it is almost exclusively based on the agricultural (principally cotton) and gold mining sectors and thus is highly dependent on price fluctuations on the world market (Kollmer 2013). Growth and poverty reduction are also mainly limited to a few urban centres, while rural areas are largely excluded from these positive developments.

**Table 1. HDI Mali, neighbouring countries, and regions.**

| 2012 HDI Rank | Name  | 2012 HDI Value | 2012 Life Expectancy at Birth | 2010 Mean Years of Schooling | 2012 Gross National Income (GNI) Per Capita |
|---------------|---|----------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| 1             | Norway  | 0.955          | 81.3                          | 12.6                         | 48688                                       |
| 2             | Australia                                       | 0.938          | 82                            | 12                           | 34340                                       |
| 3             | United States                                   | 0.937          | 78.7                          | 13.3                         | 43480                                       |
| 4             | Netherlands                                     | 0.921          | 80.8                          | 11.6                         | 37282                                       |
| 5             | Germany   | 0.92           | 80.6                          | 12.2                         | 35431                                       |
| ...           |   |                |                               |                              |   |
| 93            | Algeria   | 0.713          | 73.4                          | 7.6                          | 7418  |
| ...           |   |                |                               |                              |   |
| 54            | Senegal   | 0.47           | 59.6                          | 4.5                          | 1653  |
| 155           | Mauritania                                      | 0.467          | 58.9                          | 3.7                          | 2174  |
| ...           |   |                |                               |                              |   |
| 168           | Côte d'Ivoire                                   | 0.432          | 56                            | 4.2                          | 1593  |
| ...           |   |                |                               |                              |   |
| 178           | Guinea  | 0.355          | 54.5                          | 1.6                          | 941   |
| ...           |   |                |                               |                              |   |
| <b>182</b>    | <b>Mali</b>                                     | <b>0.344</b>   | <b>51.9</b>                   | <b>2</b>                     | <b>853</b>                                  |
| 183           | Burkina Faso                                    | 0.343          | 55.9                          | 1.3                          | 1202  |
| ...           |   |                |                               |                              |   |
| 186           | Niger   | 0.304          | 55.1                          | 1.4                          | 701   |
| na            | World   | 0.694          | 70.1                          | 7.5                          | 10184                                       |
| na            | Sub-Saharan Africa                              | 0.475          | 54.9                          | 4.7                          | 2010  |
| na            | Low human development                           | 0.466          | 59.1                          | 4.2                          | 1633  |
| na            | Least developed countries                       | 0.449          | 59.5                          | 3.7                          | 1385  |
| na            | Mali and neighbours                             |                |                               |                              |   |
| na            | Algeria included                                | 0.429          | 58.2                          | 3.3                          | 2066  |
| na            | <b>Mali and neighbours<br/>Algeria excluded</b> | <b>0.388</b>   | <b>56</b>                     | <b>2.7</b>                   | <b>1302</b>                                 |

Source: own elaboration, based on UNDP data, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>, accessed on 2 May 2014

The country's weak socio-economic performance promoted a sentiment of neglect among the northerners with regard to the central state. The situation was aggravated in 2010 by a drought that ravaged the Saharan region and provoked a major famine causing illness and death and forcing many northerners into temporary exile. The absence of the Malian state during this drought not only reinforced the prevailing sentiment of neglect but also provoked the more inflammatory interpretation of the government's non-intervention being a planned strike against the minorities in the north. It remains open to debate to what extent the absence of the state can be attributed to the inability of the government to act or can be interpreted as a concerted act of reprisal against northerners for past rebellions against the central government.

Given its status as one of the least developed countries in the world, Mali has relied heavily on international development aid. Between 1990 and 2012, Official Development Assistance (ODA)

accounted for an average of nine per cent of the country's GNI (OECD 2014). In 2011 ODA inflows represented 12.6 per cent of Mali's GNI and almost 50 per cent of its national budget (Heyl and Leininger 2013, 73). Notwithstanding the country's socio-economic difficulties, the international donor community considered Mali as one of the most positive examples of the third wave of democratisation, facilitating a steady inflow of development aid.<sup>149</sup> This glorification by the international community not only secured the Malian state considerable amounts of aid money, but also ignored many of the country's effective needs. Out of convenience or ignorance, international donors perpetuated an overly positive image of a well-functioning democracy that had, in reality, been ailing for quite some time. Behind the veil of democratic institutions and regular elections, there was a more complex situation. As critical voices suggest, the alleged "model democracy" had suffered from serious shortcomings for two decades (Bigot 2012; Penney 2013). The literacy rate among adults remained low, as did the political participation, corruption was high, and the all-inclusive multi-party government under President Amadou Toumani Touré reduced the opposition to insignificance.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, the government deliberately kept the army small to reduce the risk of a military coup, a decision that contributed to the almost immediate defeat of the Malian Army by the hands of militants in 2012 and 2013.<sup>151</sup> Most importantly, the Touré administration did not reconcile the north and the south, but rather aggravated the tensions by further marginalising northerners. Instead of engaging in negotiations about a federal governance approach, some senior officials and top-ranking officers preferred to cooperate with terrorist and criminal organisations in the Saharan desert to undermine insurgent movements in the north. In conjunction with repressive policies against the populations of the north, Mali's poor socio-economic performance enhanced a feeling of political isolation, social marginalisation, and economic asphyxiation

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<sup>149</sup> After a successful coup d'état in 1991, the then General and future President Amadou Toumani Touré (also known as ATT) did not cling to his acquired power and allowed for free elections that brought into power Alpha Oumar Konaré, who in accordance with the Malian constitution stepped down after the end of his second term in 2002. At this point, ATT was elected president reinforcing the image of Mali being a stable democracy. He was re-elected in 2007, this time pursuing 'a broad and flexible ruling coalition and a style that he referred to as "consensus" politics' (Arieff 2013b, 6).

<sup>150</sup> Transparency international ranks Mali 127 (out of 177) with an overall score of 28 (out of 100). The measured overall degree of corruption in Mali is thus higher than in most of its neighbouring countries, only surpassed by Côte d'Ivoire (136) and Guinea (150), source: Transparency international, <http://www.transparency.org/country#MLI>, accessed on 5 May 2014. The consensus system on which ATT's government was based also prompted corruption, nepotism, and patronage among the ruling elites (Arieff 2013b, 6).

<sup>151</sup> Interview with policy officer at the DCSD, Paris, 18 February 2014.

among the population of the Azawad region (Ag Ahmed 2011). Human rights violations and extrajudicial killings committed by the Malian Army inflamed this operational environment where misery began to justify violence.

#### 4.1.2 The Tuareg Insurgency and Its Aftermath

Since 1963, resurging rebel movements across the northern part of the country have kept the Malian state in constant alert. These movements have been led by the country's small Tuareg (Kel Tamasheq)<sup>152</sup> minority and constitute the most visible expression of the deep rifts that divide Mali's social fabric. Marginalised within a state they do not consider their own, the Tuareg have repeatedly claimed more autonomy for themselves and denounced the inequalities between the north and south.<sup>153</sup> The 2006-2009 period witnessed continuous violent clashes between government forces and rebels. After mediation efforts by Algeria, a fragile peace was established promising 'greater regional autonomy, the integration of Tuareg combatants into the military, and more state aid for the impoverished north' (Arieff 2013b, 6). However, like previous economic development programmes for the north, these agreements have never been fully implemented (Klute and Lecocq 2013, 127).

The land that the Tuareg traditionally considered as their homeland extends over five Saharan nations—Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, and Niger—making their struggle into a regional question (Klute and Lecocq 2013, 123). With the fall of Libya's Colonel Muammar al-Gadhafi in October 2011, numerous Tuareg militia who had previously fought on the side of Gadhafi's regime returned to Mali, bringing new momentum to the latest Tuareg rebellion. Composed of Tuareg, Songhai, Arab, and Peul

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<sup>152</sup> This is the name the Tuareg employ and means "Speakers of Tamasheq". They also refer to themselves as Imuhagh, *Imazaghan* or *Imashaghen* ("the Free People"), or *Kel Tagelmust* ("People of the Veil). The origin and meaning of the name Tuareg has been long debated and different interpretations continue to exist. According to one common but derogatory misinterpretation Tuareg is the Arabic name for "The Abandoned of God". Despite these definitional problems, I stick to the more frequently used notion Tuareg.

<sup>153</sup> Prior to the present struggle, there had been three Tuareg rebellions since Mali's independence. The first took place in the early 1960s. The second occurred at the end of the 1980s and extended to the beginning of the 1990s. A third wave of uproar began in 2006 and led to recurring outbreaks of violence between government forces and rebel groups. The Tuareg's fight for an autonomous region, however, is much older. In 1916, they engaged in a revolt against the French colonial administration which had refused to grant the Tuareg their own autonomous region, the Azawad, as was promised. The French violently suppressed the revolt, confiscated important grazing lands and fragmented the Tuareg society by drawing arbitrary boundaries that cut through the Tuareg's traditional homeland (Devon 2013).

members, the *Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA) was founded in October of the same year (MNLA 2011).<sup>154</sup> After five decades of conflict between the northerners and the central government in Bamako, during which the representatives of the north repeatedly demanded more autonomy and claimed rights of self-governance, the MNLA was the first group to formally strive for complete independence from the Malian state (Klute and Lecocq 2013, 123; 132-33).

In early 2012, the MNLA took up arms in an attempt to create an independent Azawad state.<sup>155</sup> After a series of victories that put the MNLA in near full control of the northern part of the country, the movement declared the independence of Azawad on 6 April 2012 (MNLA 2012). However, neither the Malian government nor any other state acknowledged this claim. The central government in Bamako accused the MNLA repeatedly of collaborating with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The MNLA rejected these accusations as being unfounded and described them as part of a propaganda strategy by the Malian government. MNLA leaders repeatedly referred to the violent clashes between their own divisions and several *katibas* (small battalions) belonging to AQIM, notably during the second half of 2012. In their official communications, the MNLA deplored the Tuareg's dilemma of being considered 'by some [the Malian state authorities, international media] cooperative accomplices of Islamists, whilst for AQIM being nothing else than allies of the central government' (Ag Ahmed 2010).<sup>156</sup> Above all, these reciprocal accusations demonstrate the fragmentation of the Malian society.

The MNLA's offensive in January 2012 inflicted heavy losses on the Malian military and reinforced existing resentments among the southerners against Touré's government. The massacre of 80 soldiers in the city of Adjelhoc led to a series of protests across the country and in the capital. Initiated by the widows of the soldiers who had lost their lives during the incident the protest were supported by a large part of society and continued until March 2012 (Gavelle, Siméant, and Traoré 2013, 26–29). Demonstrators denounced the government's approach against the insurgents and the weak state of the

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<sup>154</sup> On 16 October 2011, the *Mouvement National de l'Azawad* (MNA) and the *Mouvement Touareg du Nord-Mali* (MTNM) merged to create the MNLA. It is not entirely clear how many members of Gadhafi's former militia integrated into the MNLA. Some are said to have joined government forces, others terrorist organisations, and again others the MNLA.

<sup>155</sup> The definition of the Azawad state varies and some consider it to extend beyond the borders of Mali including Tuareg land across the entire Sahel-Saharan region (Arieff 2013b, 6).

<sup>156</sup> 'En effet, pour certains, les Kel Tamasheq (Touareg) ne sont que des complices coopérants avec les islamistes, et pour l'AQMI, ils ne sont que des associés du pouvoir central'.



Army.<sup>157</sup> During these anti-government protests, Capt. Amadou Haya Sanogo and a group of junior military officers overthrew President Touré in a putsch on 22 March 2012. This putsch was not simply the reaction of a small group of soldiers to the ‘appalling conditions in which the soldiers were fighting the armed groups in the north’ (Théroux-Bénoni 2013, 1), but rather expressed a more generalised popular discontent with the government’s policies. Many hoped that the coup and the ousting of the political elite would put an end to the political excesses of the past 20 years and create the conditions for the emergence of a new class of politicians. At the time of writing, these expectations have only been partially fulfilled.<sup>158</sup>

In the aftermath of the coup, the junta established the *Comité National pour le Redressement de la Démocratie et la Restauration de l’État* (CNRDR), which however failed to gain international recognition (UN Resolution 2056). Political pressure from the African Union and ECOWAS, as well as continuous conquests and massacres by militants in the north, forced coup-leader Sanogo to consent to the creation of an interim government under President Dioncounda Traoré and Prime Minister Modibo Diarra. Like its predecessor, the interim government ‘suffered from internal divisions and military interference’ in addition to the startling revenue shortages. In the meantime the rebellion in the North continued and by then had displaced over 350,000 people, provoking a serious humanitarian crisis (Arieff 2013b).<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> In 2012, the Malian military forces counted 7,350 soldiers, 400 of which were enlisted in the Air Force and 40 in the Navy. Despite significant international military aid, the Malian troops lacked weapons and equipment. Much of the military aid had been misappropriated by senior military staff before it could reach the troops (van Vliet 2013, 147). Consequently, the Malian Army was unable to avert any major attack against the state’s sovereignty.

<sup>158</sup> As of May 2014, the fighting between Tuareg rebels and government forces in the north continued. The former have retaken control over the cities of Kidal and Ménaka at a time where the negotiations between the MNLA and the central government in Bamako reached a standstill (*Libération* 2014).

<sup>159</sup> Capitan Sanogo arrested Prime Minister Modibo Diarra in December 2012 and replaced him with Django Sissoko. This incident demonstrates the ongoing internal struggles and domestic instability. Capitan Sanogo continued to play the role of an influential actor in the background. By opposing the government on the issue of a foreign intervention, Sanogo weakened the government’s position in the fight against Islamist militant groups (Schreiber 2013, 208). These internal struggles also explain the emergence of President Dioncounda Traoré as the French policy-makers’ preferred interlocutor during the crisis.

### 4.1.3 Islamist Extremists and Organised Crime

So far, the crisis in Mali has been explained with reference to the country's weak socio-economic performance, a fragile and corrupted political system, and the social and economic marginalisation of the northerners having led to continuous insurgencies. Most of these characteristics are not unique to Mali. Signs of a malfunctioning state can be detected in several francophone African states, for instance in Burkina Faso or Benin (Bigot 2012). The same is true for the social divisions between the (semi-) nomadic populations of the Sahel-Saharan zones and the sedentary populations of the south, which also exist in neighbouring Mauritania, Niger, and Chad, and have led to repeated armed conflicts in each of these countries since independence (Heisbourg 2013, 8).<sup>160</sup> The factor that transformed this national/regional crisis into a question of global interest was the presence and activities of militant Islamist groups on Mali's territory. Yet, these different factors are not unrelated, considering that the level of threat is mainly the result of 'the internal political situation, and its possible targeting by violent Islamists, including recruitment for terrorist activity' (International Crisis Group 2005, 2).

Over the past decade, the phenomenon of Islamist extremism has spread across the entire Sahel-Saharan region.<sup>161</sup> The best-known of these extremist groups, AQIM, operates across an area that reaches from Sudan in the east to Mauritania in the west. Their activities benefit from and contribute to the general instability of the entire region.<sup>162</sup> At the crossroads of global trafficking routes, the Sahara desert with its porous borders had become a safe haven for all sorts of illegal activities, ranging from

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<sup>160</sup> Niger, in many regards, is the neighbour that resembles Mali the most. In particular, the relationship between the Tuareg and the central governments are almost identical in the two countries (Fleury 2013, 71–81).

<sup>161</sup> It is interesting to note that the French Colonial Ministry at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century expressed fears of a "reformist Islam" that could lead to the radicalisation of populations in different colonies (Bonnecase and Brachet 2013, 10).

<sup>162</sup> AQIM traces its lineages back to the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC), an offshoot of the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armé*, GIA), which waged 'a violent war against Algeria's secular military regime during the 1990s' (Vriens 2009; see also Kennedy-Boudali 2007). The GIA and later GSPC originally concentrated their operations mainly on Algerian territory. However, under the leadership of Abdelmalik Drukdal, the GSPC increasingly extended its activities across the border and into the Saharan desert, becoming increasingly active on Malian territory. In January 2007, the GSPC changed their name into AQIM, suggesting direct links to Al-Qaeda. AQIM reportedly relied on financial support from Al-Qaeda in order to strengthen its position in and control over the region. However, the extent of cooperation between AQIM and Al-Qaeda is not exactly known. Some speak of considerable support through Al-Qaeda, others describe the links as 'more nominal than operational' (International Crisis Group 2005, 20). The change of name came along with a change in the organisation's programme. More than the GSPC, AQIM applies the notion of an international jihad. The renaming may have enhanced the group's legitimacy among extremists and facilitated recruiting (Arieff 2013a, 8).

cigarette and licit goods smuggling, to drug and human trafficking, arms trading, and kidnappings.<sup>163</sup> Thanks to the ready availability of arms and money, the group was able to implement itself as a local power. For AQIM, which provided the necessary “protection” to traffickers in exchange for a share of the profit, smuggling activities had become a stable source of revenue in addition to the even more lucrative kidnappings for ransom (Lacher 2012, 8–9).<sup>164</sup> In this context, ‘tensions related to the growing drug traffic, and the erosion of state institutions through complicity with organized crime’ played a detrimental role ‘in the dynamics that led to the outbreak of conflict in northern Mali in January 2012’ (Lacher 2012, 9–10). This nexus has promoted the notion of “narco-terrorism” in the French and international debates. Acknowledging some degree of relatedness of these two activities it should be noted that ‘ambiguity marks the distinction between organized crime and terrorism’ (Asal, Milward, and Schoon 2014, 1). As Asal, Milward, and Schoon (2014, 1) argue, ‘this ambiguity is perhaps most evident in terrorist organizations’ involvement in the illicit drug economy. While notable cases of ideologically driven groups engaged in the drug trade have been widely publicized, terrorist groups rarely participate in the illicit drug economy’.<sup>165</sup> International security discourses rarely distinguish between these two different activities.

Europe, America, and some regional powers such as Algeria are not entirely innocent regarding the emergence of “terrorism” in the Sahel-Saharan zone. As Keenan forcefully argues, ‘the absurdity of this approach [the US’s and Algeria’s counterterrorism strategies], which stems largely from the fact that there was no terrorism in the Sahara-Sahel [prior to the mid-2000s], is that an ever-increasing proportion of the region’s inhabitants will soon be able to call themselves “terrorists”’ (Keenan 2007, 48). The unfolding of events in 2012 and 2013 constitutes a strong factor in support of the argument that the

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<sup>163</sup> The importance of geography should not be underestimated when considering the causes of the Sahel crisis. The territory of the three states of Mauritania, Mali, and Niger alone covers an area that stretches from west to east over a distance equal to that between London and the Caspian Sea, and from north to south over a distance equal to that between Oslo and Rome. The control of such a vast and sparsely populated area, which additionally is characterised by extreme climatic and topographic conditions, would even bring well-equipped and well-functioning police and Army forces to their limits (Assemblée Nationale 2012b, 86–87).

<sup>164</sup> Between 2008 and 2012, AQIM is said to have totalled between \$40 million and \$65 million in ransom. Due to the lack of official data, an exact estimation is not possible (Lacher 2012, 9).

<sup>165</sup> With respect to the notions of narco-terrorism and the trafficking-terrorist business, Keenan holds that this phenomenon has been reinforced by a politically motivated re-definition of existing categories on the part of the US. Seemingly overnight, traffickers became terrorists and terrorists engaged in trafficking, this age-old business in the region (Keenan 2007, 48). Asal, Milward, and Schoon (2014, 2) further suggest that ‘terrorist involvement in the illicit narcotics economy should not be understood as either a logical evolution or an ideological contradiction, but rather as part of a tactical toolkit that is contingent on opportunity, access, and need.

states in the region had a substantial interest in the Sahara-Sahel becoming a zone of instability in the first place. According to Keenan (2013, 29) the ‘GWOT has been used by all regimes in the region to repress and silence legitimate political opposition by labelling it or linking it with “terrorism”, “putative terrorism” (to use an Americanism) or Islamic extremism (a euphemism for “terrorism”)’. Keen (2000, 3), discussing the case of Algeria, speaks of a collaboration between government forces and Islamic extremists because ‘the “Islamic threat” has tended to legitimize military control and undemocratic government’. This view, however, remains contested and further research is needed before drawing more definitive conclusions (Notin 2014).

Internal divisions make it difficult to determine the ultimate goals of AQIM (Arieff 2013b, 10). Several figures, including Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, claimed the organisation’s leadership provoking the creation of new factions.<sup>166</sup> One of these splinter groups was the *Mouvement pour l’Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest* (MUJAO). Initially a minor group, ‘it grew considerably in its first twelve months of operation’ and was included in the UN Al-Qaeda sanction list in December 2012, being held responsible for several abductions across the region (United Nations 2012). In particular, in and around the city of Gao, MUJAO emerged as an inevitable front for smugglers, a propagator of the jihadist idea, and occasional benefactor to the impoverished local population (Lacher 2012, 15).<sup>167</sup> Next to MUJAO was the militant group Anṣār ad-Dīn. Under the leadership of Iyad ag Ghaly—rebel leader in the 1990s, hostage mediator, and Malian diplomat to Saudi Arabia—the group initially cooperated with the MNLA in their fight against Malian government forces. In May 2012, after having conquered the principal strategic points in the Kidal region, the two groups disunited and began fighting each other. By mid-2012, Anṣār ad-Dīn evicted the MNLA from Kidal and Timbuktu (Metcalf 2012; Schreiber 2013, 208–9).

Led by France, the international community started to become alarmed by the developments in Mali from the early 2000s onwards, in particular by the kidnappings that affected an ever increasing number of Westerners, most notably French citizens. Consequently, the activities of terrorist and criminal groups

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<sup>166</sup> Abdelhamid Abou Zeid was killed by French and Chadian armed forces in February 2013.

<sup>167</sup> The parallel occurrence of ready money from external sources (ransom, smuggling, support from governments and organisations) and the rebels’ food allocations to the local population challenges the causal relationship some authors see between available sponsorship and an increased rebel-on-civilian abuse (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014).

began to be perceived as a non-contained threat having direct implications beyond the region. After asserting that the movement represented a transnational threat, the United States launched the PSI in 2003, the goal of which was to help create rapid reaction capacities in Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. In 2005, the PSI was superseded by the more ambitious TSCTP, which also included Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Nigeria, and Senegal (Filiu 2009, 7; Keenan 2013, 14–27). Successive French governments became particularly attentive to potential threats from the Sahara. France’s experience with Algerian extremist groups in the past (Shapiro and Suzan 2003, 79–84; 86-87), the establishment of closer links between AQIM and Al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2005, and AQIM’s increasing verbal attacks against France, the “mother of all evils”, furthered the perception of the existence of a global threat among French decision-makers (Filiu 2009).<sup>168</sup>

Despite the fact that both national and international actors acknowledged terrorism as a regional and international, but not a national or local problem, Mali soon was identified as the most vulnerable West African country. In 2005, the International Crisis Group concluded that ‘Mali, a star pupil of 1990s neo-liberal democratisation, runs the greatest risk of any West African country other than Nigeria of violent Islamist activity’ (International Crisis Group 2005, i). This report designated Mali as ‘the most clearly targeted [of all countries in the region] by external Islamist groups’ (2005, 2). A report by the French Parliament drew a similar conclusion in 2012. In their evaluation of the security in the Sahel region, the rapporteurs affirmed that Mali traditionally had been considered the weak point in the fight against AQIM by all neighbouring countries. Notwithstanding the initially impetuous line of action and a successful offensive against the group in 2009, the central government in Bamako did not succeed in eradicating AQIM. The failure of the Malian government to completely remove terrorist cells from its territory was explained by the government’s deliberative choice to preserve the south of the country at the costs of the north, which in any case was considered as being hostile towards the central government (Assemblée Nationale 2012b, 65). Some pundits even pointed to a direct state complicity with AQIM and other criminal groups (Ag Assarid 2012; Bigot 2012; Lacher 2012, 1; Leboeuf 2014, 46; Notin

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<sup>168</sup> In 1994, the Algerian Islamic Armed Group (*Groupe Islamique Armé*, GIA) hijacked an Air France plane from Algiers to Marseille. In 1995, the same group committed a series of bomb attacks against the Parisian subway system, killing eight and leaving hundreds injured. The attacks engraved themselves deeply into France’s collective memory.

2014, 57). In the aftermath of the 2012 coup, senior officials were quoted as saying that ‘complicity with criminal interests had “entirely taken over government policy in the north” in the final years of President Amadou Toumani Touré’s rule’ (Lacher 2012, 14).

In sum, the core factors that need to be taken into consideration when analysing the crisis in Mali are high levels of corruption, the absence of a strong political leader, the schisms between the south and the north, a weak and underequipped Malian Army, and the administration’s alleged complicity with criminal groups in the north. All these factors made Mali particularly vulnerable to attacks from terrorists and rebels and established the terrain of another French military intervention in Africa (Assemblée Nationale 2012b, 66).

## 4.2 The French Decision-Making Process

Like the crisis itself, the French decision-making process from the early perception of a threat to the final decision in favour of a military intervention evolved gradually. The remainder of this chapter explains the French decision by bringing the actors’ subjective reading of reality to the forefront. More precisely, the following sections discuss the nascence and subsequent development of specific interpretations throughout the securitisation process of the Malian crisis. In the first section, I probe the appearance of the crisis in Mali on the French security agenda and explain why French actors have considered the Malian crisis as a salient issue for their nation’s security from a very early moment onwards. The next section concentrates on the policy framing and diffusion of possible solutions to the crisis throughout the second half of 2012. The final section engages with the French decision to intervene and proposes an answer to the overall puzzle of why France launched a unilateral strike in January 2013 despite the continuous negation of this option.

#### 4.2.1 Inclusion of the Malian Crisis on the Security Agenda: The Four Dimensions of Proximity

Officials in Paris registered first warnings about a deteriorating security situation in the Sahel region in the early 2000s. At first, the insecurity in the Sahel region was largely attributed to the activities of armed groups engaged in the prospering drug-traffic business. As mentioned above, a series of kidnappings of mainly European citizens in the border zone between Algeria, Mali, and Mauritania committed by the GSPC and later AQIM were among the first evident signs that alerted French decision-makers about the severity of the situation.<sup>169</sup> In response to these developments, the French government offered the Malian government technical assistance in restoring security in the north. It is at that time that the military developed first operational plans for a possible future intervention in Mali. Soon, however, French policy-makers realised that a close cooperation at the operational level would not be possible.

With the plan Sahel in 2007, we made the advent of a danger official. We asked Mali to reinforce their troop deployments in the north. They, indeed, sent troops to the north, but they remained sheltered in the barracks. In real terms, they did not do anything. There was a lack of will to truly cooperate. They [the Malian authorities] were happy to receive financial assistance, but did not cooperate at the operational level.<sup>170</sup>

As the political and security situation in Mali deteriorated further over the course of the following years, foreign policy elites in Paris began to consider the possibility of an escalation of the crisis and the erosion of the Malian state. As Vice Chief of Staff Didier Castres attests, beginning in 2010 the CPCO elaborated first plans for the liberation of the Adrar des Ifoghas massif, a mountain chain in proximity to the Algerian border that served as refuge for Islamist fighters during the French offensive three years later.<sup>171</sup> In the same year, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs began developing briefing notes based on the

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<sup>169</sup> Interview with policy officer at the Ministry of Defence, Paris, 10 July 2013. By the end of 2012 seven French citizens were being held hostage (Koeopf 2013a).

<sup>170</sup> Interview with policy officer at the DCSD, Paris, 18 February 2014. *‘Avec le plan Sahel de 2007 on a officialisé l’arrivée du danger. On a demandé au Mali de renforcer le déploiement de troupes dans le Nord. Ils ont envoyé des troupes dans le Nord mais eux sont restés dans les casernes. Donc effectivement, ils n’ont rien fait. Il y avait un manque de volonté de véritable coopération. Ils étaient contents de recevoir le soutien financier mais sur le plan opérationnel ils ne coopéraient pas’.*

<sup>171</sup> Didier Castres, vice chief of staff, interview by author, Paris, 18 February 2014. The CPCO is responsible for the pre-decisional planning, the operational planning, and the management of operations. The plans mentioned above are part of the pre-decisional planning phase during which a situation is evaluated and possible strategic options proposed. Reflections at this stage include the goal of the operation, the framework of the operation

assumption of a collapsed Malian state. As one civil servant states, ‘I arrived at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2010 and was immediately told that I have to work on the Malian question, since things will go awry. At that time we thought that [the situation in Mali] will escalate because of the Tuareg rebellion and later because of the consequences of the military operation in Libya’.<sup>172</sup>

However, these events alone do not explain why French decision-makers were particularly sensitive to the developments in Mali and finally decided to launch Operation Serval in January 2013; in particular since President Hollande and the majority within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were categorically opposed to a military intervention in Mali at that stage (Notin 2014, 144). To understand the French decision, one needs to engage with the actors’ cognitive reasoning. The 2003 Saharan hostage crisis, which marked the beginning of the prospering kidnapping industry in the region, illustrated that observable facts can lead to most different interpretations and thus induce a multitude of policy decisions (Daniel 2012). In April 2003, a group of European tourists were abducted in the Algerian desert, when travelling along a ‘route, dubbed the *Piste des Tombeaux* (graveyard path), a name which it acquired because of the large number of prehistoric tombs in its vicinity’ (Keenan 2007, 32). The majority of the thirty-two seized tourists were German citizens; none of them was French. If government action is understood as a simple reaction to a well-defined stimulus, in this case the kidnappings of a given state’s citizens, one would expect the situation in Mali to enjoy a similar prominence on Germany’s security agenda. However, this was not the case. Disparities regarding the perception and recognition of the severity of the Malian crisis remained enormous between France and its European partners (see below). In the April 2012 issue of *Le Monde diplomatique*, Philippe Leymarie (2012) explains with much precision how the Sahel had turned into a ‘powder keg’ and how this would affect France, given its past and future role in the region. Six months later, the *Handelsblatt* published an article in which the authors regret the quasi-total ignorance of the situation among German politicians.

What do we actually know about the situation in Mali? Many Germans, and many politicians and soldiers, don't have the slightest idea. German foreign policy experts haven't even made an issue of the fact that something akin to a new 'safe harbor' for al-Qaida and its ilk and a Stone Age Islamist

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(unilateral, multilateral), the nature of the operation, the number of troops needed, and a tentative calendar (Teule 2007, 65–66).

<sup>172</sup> Interview with civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 5 February 2014. ‘*Je suis arrivé au Ministère des Affaires Étrangères fin 2010 et on m'a tout de suite dit qu'il faut travailler sur le Mali, parce que ça va mal tourner. À l'époque on pensait que ça allait mal tourner à cause de la rébellion touareg qui était en formation, et puis à cause des conséquences de l'opération au Libye.*’



regime is establishing itself there, right at Europe's backdoor. There has been no parliamentary debate and neither the chancellor nor the foreign and defense ministers have done anything to raise awareness of the fact that German interests actually are affected by the North African country. (quoted in Lindsey 2012)

This considerable discrepancy in the perception of the events in the Sahel asks for an explanation. It also shows that by merely looking at observable facts, one necessarily misses crucial parts of the story (Lake 2013, 579). A positivist reading of reality that concentrates exclusively on observable facts cannot grasp the differences in perception and the diverging priority the German and French governments attributed to the conflict in Mali in 2012. Nor does it explain why the Hollande administration from July 2012 onwards emerged as the principal supporter of an African-led peacekeeping mission to Mali. To provide answers to these questions, it becomes necessary, as I have argued in detail in Chapter Two, to account for ideational and cognitive dimensions of decision-making. To do so, I analyse the appearance and inclusion of the Malian crisis on the French security agenda with reference to the notion of *proximity*.

In contrast to the “continuity and change” paradigm, which remains a dominant concept in the literature on Franco-African relations (see Chapter One; Martin 1995; Huliaras 2002; Cumming 2013), the concept of proximity emerges directly from the French political discourse and thus allows for a close analysis of the decision-makers’ subjective cognitive maps. By engaging with concepts and terminologies that French actors themselves invented, shaped, and developed, I intend to transgress the disciplinary boundaries ‘that had been established by prevailing conceptualisations’ (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008, 118). Proximity is one of the lenses through which French actors have perceived the crisis in Mali and thus can be employed as an analytical concept regardless of one’s disciplinary heritage or ontological assumptions. Proximity can—according to the context within which decision-makers deploy the term—refer to a temporal, a geographic, cultural or a human/societal dimension. In its different forms, the concept facilitated an early appreciation of the Malian conflict among the political elite in Paris. In the following, I introduce the different dimensions of the term proximity. It should be noted that the notion is not exclusively used in the context of the Malian crisis but defines French elites’ perception of the Franco-African relationship in general. The discussion on proximity in the Malian case thus ties into the wider debate on the impact of the “African factor” on French decision-making

processes. Although introduced here to analyse the threat-perception stage, the concept also influenced the subsequent phases of the decision-making process.

### *Temporal Proximity*

Proximity's temporal dimension takes the form of a bidirectional projection. Decision-makers, when framing present discourses, explicitly or implicitly refer to France's past and future role in Africa. Descriptions of the past emphasised the longstanding special relationship. In contrast, the understanding of France's future role is deliberately free of nostalgia, pragmatic and mainly concentrates on economic aspects of the partnership. Together these two elements constitute a knowledge structure that informs French decision-makers in their discourses and actions. The longstanding and close relationship between France and francophone Africa is interpreted as a permissive and explanatory factor of France's continuous presence and interest in that region of the world.

Colonisation creates a relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, which lasts even after the end of the decolonisation...For 50 years, whether we want to or not, we have gotten involved in their [African] politics. Today, this is less often the case. [But] we [still] continue to help them....This is an historical link. When one was the coloniser of another country for more than 150 years, the ties do not dissolve that quickly.<sup>173</sup>

Through the colonial and later the post-colonial experience 'a space of common identity that brought together Franco-Africans' was created (Charbonneau 2014, 616). These elements of togetherness remain integral to the self-understanding of today's French political elite and shape decision-makers' understanding of what is just and what is possible. Perceptions of self-interest and responsibility largely derive from the historical relationship (Brysk, Parsons, and Sandholtz 2002, 268). Building on 'the remnants of a long history...it is not difficult to justify an intervention in Mali, whereas it is more difficult to justify an intervention in a country like Afghanistan or even Syria'.<sup>174</sup> The belief in some

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<sup>173</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of the interior, Paris, 12 February 2014. '*La colonisation a créé un rapport entre le pays colonisateur et le pays colonisé qui dure bien après la fin de la décolonisation....Depuis 50 ans, si on le veut ou non, on se mêle dans leur politique. Aujourd'hui c'est beaucoup moins fort. On a continué à les aider. On fait beaucoup de formation. C'est un lien historique. Quand on était à peu près 150 ans colonisateur d'un pays, les liens ne se défont pas aussi vite.*'

<sup>174</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 16 September 2013. '*Ce sont les restes d'une histoire longue, qui était celle de la colonisation et qui était celle de la décolonisation où les Français vivent encore avec le souvenir d'un large empire, où ils croyaient de vendre la civilisation, où il n'y a pas de difficultés de justifier une intervention au Mali, alors qu'il est plus difficile de la justifier dans un pays comme l'Afghanistan, voire même la Syrie.*'

kind of natural, long-term rapport that is independent of the ephemeral day-to-day policy-making elevates the French-African relationship to something special. French actors describe this gradually grown relationship as a particular leverage and the biggest difference between themselves and so-called new and emerging actors.<sup>175</sup>

Having said this, the historical legacy of the French-African relationship does not only function as a permissive but also as a constraining factor. It limits decision-makers' discourses and practices.<sup>176</sup> Decision-makers are particularly wary of distinguishing between historical influences and the Franco-African relationship of yore. As one French senator maintains, today's relationship between France and Africa is 'no longer a tête-à-tête between France and Africa; it is no longer dad's or granddad's *Françafrique*. It is simply a normal relationship between France, which is still a great nation, and the Africans, whom we know better than others do'.<sup>177</sup> President François Hollande, for his part, acknowledges that a sincere engagement with France's colonial history and a recognition of past misdeeds is necessary to build together with France's former colonies partnerships for the future: '[What counts is] the truth about the past, truth about colonialism, truth about the [Algerian War (1954-1962)] war with all its tragedies, truth about hurt memories. At the same time, however, [we need to avoid] the past impeding us from working towards the future. The past—once recognised—must allow us to go faster and further in preparing the future'<sup>178</sup> (Hollande 2012f).

Elsewhere, the President evokes the risk of seeing the past 'as a form of recrimination' (Hollande 2012d), a risk which, if possible, should be avoided. The limits imposed by colonial and neo-colonial practices are omnipresent in France's present relationship with its former colonies. Since these shadows from the past cannot be simply removed, they need to be faced and if possible transformed into a more opportune operational environment. This transformation of France's neo-colonial legacy into a post

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<sup>175</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014.

<sup>176</sup> On the one hand, the colonial experience is cited as an element that explains France's continuous special relationship with the African continent, on the other, French politicians since the mid-1990s have portrayed their own actions as the polar opposite of France's colonial and neo-colonial policies.

<sup>177</sup> Jeanny Lorgeoux, senator, interview by author, Paris, 5 December 2013. '*Mais ce n'est plus un tête-à-tête entre la France et l'Afrique, ce n'est plus la Françafrique de Papa ou de Grand-papa. C'est simplement des relations normales entre la France, qui reste quand même une grande nation et les Africains, qu'on connaît mieux que les autres*'.

<sup>178</sup> '*...vérité sur le passé, vérité sur la colonisation, vérité sur la guerre avec ces drames, avec ces tragédies, vérité sur les mémoires blessées. Mais en même temps volonté de faire que le passé ne nous empêche pas de faire le travail pour l'avenir. Le passé doit, dès lors qu'il est reconnu, nous permettre d'aller beaucoup plus vite, beaucoup plus loin pour préparer l'avenir...*'

colonial<sup>179</sup> approach has been an ongoing process for more than two decades, and which the literature usually labels as period of *normalisation* (see Chapter One).

One way to overcome the constraints created by France's historical involvement in Africa is to draw a clear-cut distinction between past and present practices and to engage in a forward-looking discourse of modernisation, which partially legitimatises the formulation of interests. The "rise of Africa" debate provides the intellectual context within which such a new definition of France's relationship with Africa takes place (Mahajan 2009; Radelet 2010; Ellis 2012). Referring to Africa's rapid growth over the past decade and its young populations, French elites repeatedly have heralded that 'the time of Africa has come'<sup>180</sup> (Benguigui 2012) and have thus embraced what experts usually refer to as an afro-optimist/positivist attitude (Severino and Ray 2011). Afro-positivism predicts that Africa will follow East Asia in its economic if not social development and is likely to become one of the future centres of economic and political power. Just as with any prediction, this prediction involves a considerable degree of uncertainty and remains a protension of present observations (Bigo 2011, 243). More cautionary scholars point to the prevailing poverty, the relative lack of infrastructure, and the weak institutions in many African countries. Accordingly, the rise of Africa and its achievement of sustainable prosperity constitute only one of several options for the continent's possible future. However, when reading the French discourse on Africa's future, this option appears to be a truism towards which French actors are adapting their current practices. The belief in Africa's rise in conjunction with the conviction that their country's destiny is inextricably linked to the development of the African continent let the maintenance of close ties with Africa appear as crucial for a variety of strategic and economic reasons (Hollande 2012j). Affirming strategic and economic interests in Africa seems to be an accepted motivation for French action as long as these are geared towards the future.

Beyond the moral values [...] we think the [African] continent is on the rise, which for us is an opportunity. Africa is the lieu of growth today, just after Asia. [...] One of the principal impediments of Africa's emergence is precisely the instability, the wars, and the conflicts. Put bluntly, it is in our direct economic interest [to create stability]. This can result in jobs in our country, contracts for our

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<sup>179</sup> Deliberately written without hyphen to indicate the term's meaning as a rupture with the negative aspects of the past.

<sup>180</sup> 'Le temps de l'Afrique est arrivé'.

companies...we have a stake in contributing to the resolution of some of these conflicts, be it by supporting the Africans, be it by doing it on our own.<sup>181</sup>

The truth is that we do not have any other choice but to take care of Africa. We must do this in the most intelligent way possible. I am very optimistic with respect to Africa's future in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Africa is a continent with extraordinary resources, many talents, and populations that simply need to be educated. It is a problem of education and democratic stabilisation...It is our duty to contribute to this stabilisation.<sup>182</sup>

French actors across the entire political spectrum are convinced that Africa's emergence has become palpable and that France needs to remain present in the region in order to benefit from Africa's growth in the future. In light of this discourse, one easily overlooks that references to Africa's growth in the French discourse are a social construction par excellence. Pointing to future economic opportunities as one of the motivations of French policy-making in Africa is not the same as saying that economic interests can explain France's policy-making in Africa. In their study of special relationships between European nations and their ex-colonies Brysk et al. (2002, 268) argue that material incentives only impact upon decision-making processes after being 'perceived through the lenses of specific, post-imperial ideas and identities'. In other words, interests and ideas become inseparable elements of the same analytical frame or as Blyth (2002, 270) puts it, interests are 'intrinsically bound up with ideas'.<sup>183</sup> This point becomes clear when looking at France's trade balance with Africa. According to Chipman (1989, 186), material considerations had never been the primary driving force behind France's African policies. While this statement can be debated in particular in light of France's provisioning of strategic raw materials (Martin 1985; Krosiak 2008, 64–65), it is likewise a fact that since the 1980s, Africa has

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<sup>181</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014. *'Au-delà des valeurs morales, s'il y a un risque de génocide il faut intervenir, au-delà de ça on pense que le continent s'engage dans un développement accéléré que c'est pour nous une opportunité. C'est le lieu de la croissance aujourd'hui, c'est le deuxième après l'Asie. Et beaucoup de pays ont des taux à deux chiffres déjà depuis dix ans. Donc, un des principaux freins à cette émergence de l'Afrique, c'est l'instabilité justement, c'est les guerres et les conflits. C'est dans notre intérêt économique tout simplement. Ça peut être des emplois chez nous, des activités pour nos entreprises... on a intérêt à contribuer à soit un traitement direct de certains de ces conflits, soit à aider les Africains à le pouvoir faire eux-mêmes'*.

<sup>182</sup> Pierre Lellouche, MP, interview by author, Paris, 7 February 2014. *'La réalité, c'est que nous n'avons pas le choix que de nous occuper de l'Afrique. Il faut le faire le plus intelligemment possible. Je suis un grand optimiste sur l'avenir en Afrique en 21e siècle. C'est un pays...un continent qui a énormément de richesses, beaucoup de talents, de populations qui ont juste besoin d'être éduqué. C'est un problème d'éducation et de stabilisation démocratique. Si les conditions sont réunies, les potentiels sont considérables. On le voit dans certains pays comme le Ghana. La croissance du Ghana est à 14 per cent. C'est à nous d'aider à cette stabilisation démocratique'*.

<sup>183</sup> As Blyth (2002, 270) points out, the move from material reductionism should not imply a parallel move to ideational essentialism.

carried almost no weight in France's external trade balance sheets. For the years 2011 to 2013, the entire African continent accounted for only 5.3 per cent of France's imports and 6.5 per cent of its exports in goods. During the same period, Mali's share amounted to 0.002 per cent of France's imports and 0.071 per cent of France's exports.<sup>184</sup> Even if one assumes that a collapse of the Malian state would have had implications on the entire region, the impact on France's foreign trade balance would have remained marginal. Within the West African region Mali ranks among the economically weaker states. Mali's trade accounts for only one fifth of the trade between France and Côte d'Ivoire (Notin 2014, 20). At the same time, France remains Mali's principal trading partner, as is the case for the majority of francophone African states. Mann (2008, 10) understands such economic imbalances as an expression of imperial dominance. Indeed, a more differentiated examination of French trade statistics suggests a parallel occurrence of macroeconomic losses and possible gains for individual French companies (Adda and Smouts 1989, 65–75). Chabal (1991, 293) points out that while the French exchequer does not profit much from African trade, French businesses do. The best-known examples of French companies being implemented on the African market include the mining company Areva, the telecommunications provider Bouygues, and the investment and industrial holding group Bolloré. Even if we concede that the French state has certain stakes in the profitability of these companies, the activities of a limited number of French multinationals alone cannot explain how Africa's rise at the macroeconomic level became a truism. Adding to this, as 'internationalization has proceeded over the past 25 years, the economic and political importance of businesses with activities in the former colonies has diminished' (Brysk, Parsons, and Sandholtz 2002, 276), not however the belief in prosperous Franco-African relations.

To draw conclusions about future scenarios by looking at an observable status quo actors rely on cognitive shortcuts. History plays a crucial role in the constitution of these cognitive shortcuts. Past experience and predictions of the future are inherent in 'every opinion, in every proposal for action, every decision' (H. Sprout and M. Sprout 1965, 177). Experiences as well as expectations about the future are at the heart of decision-makers' psychological environment and thus influence present

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<sup>184</sup> Own calculations based on the International Trade Centre database, <http://www.trademap.org>, accessed on 10 September 2014. France's trade surplus resulting from trade in goods with Mali amounted to approximately €398 million in 2013. The costs of France's external operations for the same year added up to €1 billion.

discourses and practices. In the case of Mali, this means that both France's historical relationship and the general expectations of a prosperous African future influenced the decision-making process by creating incentives for French actors to pay increased attention to the developments in the Sahel.

### *Cultural Proximity*

The belief in "Africa's rise" explains why the continent continues to enjoy priority on France's foreign policy agenda. Such general appreciation is less useful to explain France's early perception and subsequent involvement in the specific case of the Malian crisis. As we saw above, in terms of economic interests, Mali falls behind most other francophone African states. As Marchal (2013a, 498) states, 'There are a few thousand French residents in Mali, but most of them are dual nationals and do not have the same economic importance as the French community in Côte d'Ivoire or Gabon'. Gold is Mali's principal high-value natural resource. The fact that the world's third largest gold producer had changed its mining code just nine days before the launch of Operation Serval led some critics to interpret the French military mission as a way to safeguard these resources. They, however, as Notin (2014, 21) points out, tend to forget that Mali's annual production in gold values but €364 million, which is less than half of the costs of Operation Serval in 2013 alone. Others refer to France's interests in Niger's uranium reserves as the principal motivation of military intervention (Ahluwalia 2013; Koepf 2013a, 6; Kimenyi and Routman 2013; Weiss and Welz 2014, 903). However, justifying an ad hoc medium-scale military intervention in one country with reference to strategic and economic interests that France may have in another country seems only partially convincing at best. France's mining interests in Niger may have affected the decision at the operational level, in particular in terms of possible impacts of the military intervention on the mining sites' security, but they did not constitute the principal motivation of Operation Serval.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Frédéric Charillon, director of the IRSEM, interview by author, Paris, 17 January 2014. In fact, Operation Serval increased the risk of terrorist attacks on French mining sites in neighbouring countries. Shortly after the launching of operation Serval one of Areva's mining sites in Arlit (Niger) was hit by a terrorist attack that caused one death among the Nigerien workers. Additionally, Niamey wants to increase the royalties that Areva has to pay to Niger. If the terms of a new mining code passed in 2006 were implemented, Areva would be forced to pay between 12 and 15 per cent in royalties. This would constitute an additional burden to the company, which currently obtains 20 per cent of its uranium supplies from Niger, but intends to reduce this share to 10 per cent over the next years (Hofnung 2013; Hicks 2014; Hofnung 2014).

There are economic interests, no doubt. But they are never the triggering factors. We never say: Look, we are going to launch an operation in Niger, or in Mali, to protect Areva's uranium mines in Niger.... This has only a marginal impact.... I can guarantee you that the decision to intervene in Mali has no link whatsoever—besides, I was very upset when I read this in the German media—with the control of the uranium in Niger. This question never appeared during the discussions at the top of the state.<sup>186</sup>

Most insiders of French politics agree that economic considerations played no or at most a minor role during the decision-making process that led to Operation Serval.<sup>187</sup> While references to material interests were almost completely absent when justifying the French intervention in Mali, there was no lack of arguments referring to a shared Franco-African culture. In the eyes of French elites, as well as in those of many of their francophone African counterparts, cultural proximity serves both as explanation of France's continuous interest in Africa and as justification of its role as important security actor on the African continent. Cultural relations are considered as a field where France can exercise considerable influence without being accused of neo-colonial aspirations. France remains a legitimised and accepted cultural reference within and beyond the francophone world. Vice-versa for French decision-makers, 'Africa is not a continent like any other. We have a historic relationship that remains very strong. When I say 'historic' I do not imply that this is a relationship of the past, it is the cultural relationship which is very strong. Culture understood as linguistic ties, the number of Africans that live in France, who have the double-nationality. France and francophone Africa are coming ever closer'.<sup>188</sup>

Shared culture, notably the common language, has created a sentiment of relatedness among French policy-makers towards francophone Africa. Thus, the 'We' expands beyond the national boundaries and comprises other states and societies that share French culture and language. Besides producing the sentiment of relatedness as an end in itself, cultural proximity can also be understood in more traditional

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<sup>186</sup> Camille Grand, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, interview by author, Paris, 23 July 2013. '*Si vous voulez les intérêts économiques, il y en a indiscutablement, mais là aussi ce n'est jamais l'élément déclencheur. On ne se dit jamais : Tiens, on va faire une opération au Niger, ou au Mali, pour protéger les mines d'uranium d'Areva au Niger.... Ça joue un peu à la marge.... je peux vous garantir que la décision d'intervenir au Mali n'a aucun lien, et d'ailleurs j'étais très choqué quand je l'ai vu dans la presse allemande, n'a aucun lien avec la question du contrôle de l'uranium du Niger. Cette question n'est jamais apparue dans la discussion au sommet de l'État*'.

<sup>187</sup> Isabelle Lasserre, Journalist at Le Monde, interview by author, Paris, 23 August 2013.

<sup>188</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014. '*Pour la France l'Afrique n'est pas un continent comme les autres. On a une relation historique qui reste très forte. Quand je dis historique ce n'est pas une relation du passé, c'est une relation culturelle qui est très forte. Culture en sens des liens de la langue, le nombre des Africains qui vivent en France, qui sont binationaux. La France est l'Afrique francophone s'approchent de plus en plus...*'.



soft–power terms (Nye 1990; Nye 2007). Soft power is about ‘influencing or controlling the meaning of normality’ (Berenskoetter 2007, 672) or as the concept’s inventor and most prominent advocate, Joseph Nye (2004, 256), puts it, ‘Soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments’. In this sense, cultural proximity can be understood as a purposefully constructed instrument to justify French interests and to increase France’s power in the region. However, cognitive maps such as perceived proximity are never exclusively instrumental. They always fulfil the two functions of analysing and justifying (Khong 1992, 16). The term ‘interest’, which in itself is a void concept, requires a process of meaning-giving, hence the dual-function of cognitive maps.

French elites continue to attach great importance to the role of cultural policies in France’s external relations. Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius listed the so-called *rayonnement culturel* (cultural influence/standing) among the eight aspects that define France as a *puissance d’influence* (Fabius 2013k). It is thus no surprise that French governments invest considerable material, human, and ideational capital in exactly this policy realm. As Ager (2005, 57) summarises succinctly:

Since decolonisation, France’s cultural policy towards Africa has been an infallible indicator of the particularity and complexity of Franco-African relations. Indeed, it is one of the most characteristic features of what is often referred to as *l’exception française* in international relations, for whereas other former colonial nations see development assistance as a remit which is limited to socio-economic concerns over health, education and welfare, France’s aid programme has always contained a mainstream of budgets for, among other things, French language teaching, francophone cinema and sponsorships to French universities.

Most of the time, France’s *rayonnement culturel* is equated with the promotion and diffusion of the French language. For the president ‘language... is a means [for France] to be bigger than it is’ (Hollande 2012j).<sup>189</sup> French politicians are convinced that language serves as an instrument that assures their influence abroad, particularly in francophone Africa.

Imagine you were the minister of hydrocarbons of an African state, and you studied at the Sorbonne, you speak perfect French, you have French friends...and when you are minister it is easier for you to have a discussion with Paris than with Moscow or Washington. If, on the other hand, you studied in Washington, or Yale, or Harvard, or somewhere else, it would be easier for you to be [être] with them. The diplomacy of influence begins with the language.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> ‘Le combat pour la langue française est une bataille pour la diversité et le pluralisme, une manière pour notre pays d’être plus grand que lui-même’.

<sup>190</sup> Jeanny Lorgeoux, senator, interview by author, Paris, 5 December 2013. ‘Imaginez, vous êtes ministre des hydrocarbures dans un pays africain, mais vous avez fait vos études à la Sorbonne, vous parlez parfaitement français, vous avez des potes français, quand vous êtes ministre vous avez plus de facilité de vous entretenir avec

As core member of *La Francophonie*—an intergovernmental organisation for the promotion of language, cultures, and norms—France can rely on a large network of states within which new ideas and positions are tested, coalitions formed, and conflict resolutions proposed, away from the limelight that surrounds major international security summits or the work of the UN Security Council.

Besides providing a space where coalitions are built, the Francophonie is also a lieu of norm diffusion. For Hollande, the Francophonie ‘is not simply any language...but the language of values and principles and among these principles there are democracy, good governance, and the fight against corruption’ (Hollande 2012o).<sup>191</sup> In other words, the Francophonie permits French elites to promote (their) values and ideas abroad. This promotion of values is not limited to the discursive realm but can be sustained by other means. For instance, in recent years “francophone peacekeeping” has emerged as a popular and widely debated concept among both academics and practitioners (see for instance special issue of *International Peacekeeping* (2012:19(3))). In his speeches, the French president makes room for this continuum between norm promotion and policy-making. Reminding the diplomatic corps of the role the French language plays in foreign policy-making he argued, ‘Finally, when I mention our identity, when I speak of our values, of our place in the world, of our attachment to the rule of law, I don’t forget the asset that our language and our culture constitute. *Language is a way of thinking a way of acting*’ (Hollande 2012j, emphasis added).<sup>192</sup> In the case of the Malian crisis, a parliamentary report from March 2012 considered it ‘vital to support the Francophonie, be it in the realm of education or by supporting francophone media’ (Assemblée Nationale 2012b, 97–98) in order to prevent AQIM from diffusing their ideology in northern Mali.

Cultural proximity influenced the perception and the subsequent decision-making process during the crisis in Mali in two ways. First, it allowed for the creation of a sentiment of belonging or relatedness. This relatedness in turn precipitated a sense of responsibility among French elites and thus facilitated

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*Paris qu’avec Moscou ou Washington. Si à l’inverse vous faites vos études à Washington ou à Yale ou à Harvard ou ailleurs, pareil vous avez plus de facilité d’être avec eux. La diplomatie d’influence commence avec la langue’.*

<sup>191</sup> *En leur disant que la Francophonie, ce n’est pas simplement une langue. C’est d’ailleurs une langue qui n’est pas celle de la France, qui est aussi celle de l’Afrique. Dans quelques années, c’est en Afrique que l’on parlera le plus le français. Et je vais m’adresser à eux pour leur dire que cette langue leur appartient mais qu’elle suppose aussi d’être une langue qui soit celle de valeurs, de principes. Et parmi ces valeurs et ces principes, il y a la démocratie, il y a bonne gouvernance, il y a la lutte contre toutes les corruptions’.*

<sup>192</sup> *‘Enfin, lorsque j’évoque notre identité, lorsque je parle de nos valeurs, de notre place dans le monde, de notre attachement au droit, je n’oublie pas aussi l’atout de notre langue et de notre culture. La langue, c’est une manière de penser et aussi d’agir’.*

the making of action.<sup>193</sup> Second, cultural proximity and most notably the promotion of the French language were employed as soft-power tools by French foreign policy-makers. These tools were particularly effective within the francophone geo-linguistic space.

### ***Geographic and Human Proximity***

Closely related to the idea of a common geo-linguistic space is the assumption that the geographic vicinity between France/Europe and the African continent requires France/Europe to pay particular attention to its African neighbour. Geographic or geopolitical images constitute an essential component of the set of cognitive images that actors hold. In particular foreign policy-makers rely heavily on ‘geographical ideas, images, and associated reasoning processes’ (Henrikson 2002, 440).

France in its approach towards Africa—whatever else one may say—is influenced more by geography than by history. Africa is our neighbour, more than other continents that are farther away. It is a neighbour with many problems and which is experiencing a rapid demographic and luckily economic growth. But it is difficult to make accurate longer-term forecasts about Africa. If things get on the wrong course, this will have an impact on us.<sup>194</sup>

In a sense, the appearance of the crisis in Mali on France’s security agenda as well as the subsequent decision to intervene militarily were based on a ‘distance thinking’ (Henrikson 2002, 440) that approximated the Sahel and Europe. During the reasoning processes that precede any decision, geographical distances transform into subjective distances. These subjective or ‘attributional’ distances are dependent on a whole set of cultural, political, and historical ties between the entities in question (Henrikson 2002, 457–60). In several conversations I had with French decision-makers and civil servants, a terrorist threat stemming from the Sahel was ranked higher than equal threats stemming from Afghanistan or Syria. When I asked why, the answers nearly always involved a reference to the smaller distance between France (Europe) and Mali (Africa). These actors did not refer to objective distances (e.g. the distance by land between Paris and Bamako is 6137 km while the distance between Paris and

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<sup>193</sup> The concept of responsibility will be discussed in detail below.

<sup>194</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014. *‘L’approche de la France vis-à-vis de l’Afrique quoi qu’on dise on est très vite rattrapé par la géographie plus que par l’histoire. L’Afrique est notre voisin, plus que des continents plus éloignés. C’est un voisin qui a beaucoup de problèmes qui est en pleine croissance démographique, économique aussi, heureusement, mais on voit bien qu’il est difficile de faire des prévisions à long terme sur l’Afrique. Si les choses prennent un mauvais cours, ça aura un impact sur nous-mêmes’.*

Damascus is only 4378km) but to an image that merges objective distances with perceived distances (Henrikson 2002, 443).<sup>195</sup> Specific figures of speech in the French discourse emphasised the proximity of the two regions by discursively reducing the distance between them. Phrases like ‘...the constitution of a terrorist base...heavily armed on *Europe’s doorsteps*...’<sup>196</sup> (Assemblée Nationale 2013a, 4781 emphasis added) drew the Sahel region and the European continent closer together. The spatial distance was annihilated and the crisis not primarily portrayed as happening in the Sahel, but within the European neighbourhood.

And we [Europeans] do not realise that today we live in a completely globalised system, where drug traffickers, the people of Al Qaeda, local claims...all this blends and can have repercussions on European territory, be it through immigration, or terrorist attacks. Africa is 14 kilometres from us. If you are in Spain, you are 14 kilometres away from all this. If you are in the north of Finland, of course this is another planet.<sup>197</sup>

Attributional distances are malleable and dependent on a series of cultural, historic, and societal factors. The shared Franco-African history and the cultural links discussed above are two factors that reduce the attributional distance between France and Africa, making actors neglect ‘the intervening obstacles of a sea, mountains, and the world’s largest [hot] desert’ (Brysk, Parsons, and Sandholtz 2002, 280). Migration plays a crucial role in shaping the perception of decision-makers regarding the attributional distances between states. The visibility of a given migrant community reduces the perception of distances among not only the migrants themselves but also among the actors of the host state. It contributes to the creation of a sentiment of familiarity with the situation on the ground. According to one advisor to the French president, Mali constituted ‘...a theatre of operations that the French know, because it is enough to go to the next café where they can talk to a Malian, who will tell

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<sup>195</sup> Decision-makers provided rather vague understandings of the actual distance using terms such as “a few miles” or “a couple of hundreds of kilometres”. Others, referring to the strait of Gibraltar, described a threat developing 14 km from Europe’s borders. Eugene Staley (1941) found similar distortions in the perceptions of American policy-makers when comparing their understanding of distances between places located on the American continent and overseas locations.

<sup>196</sup> ‘*En outre, ce qui se produisait au Nord-Mali depuis une bonne décennie et que nos forces ont découvert n’était rien d’autre que la constitution d’une base terroriste, d’un foyer terroriste puissamment armé aux portes de l’Europe, qui menaçait directement l’ensemble de la région sahélienne, mais, à terme, également le continent européen*’.

<sup>197</sup> Pierre Lellouche, MP, interview by author, Paris, 7 February 2014. ‘*Et on ne réalise pas qu’aujourd’hui on est dans un système complètement mondialisé, et où les trafiquants de drogues, les gens d’AQIM, les revendications locales, tout ça se mélange et peut avoir des prolongements sur le sol européen, par l’immigration, par les attentats. L’Afrique est à quatorze kilomètres de nous. Quand on est en Espagne on est quatorze kilomètres de tout ça. Quand on est au Nord de la Finlande évidemment c’est une autre planète*’.

them “yes, we need to do it”. The Malian diaspora in France supported the intervention. The consensus in favour of this operation was very strong’.<sup>198</sup> It can be argued that both the presence and the active role of the Malian community in France reinforced the visibility of the crisis. Estimations for the number of Malians living in France range from 80,000 to 120,000 persons, most of whom are installed in and around Paris, notably in the city of Montreuil (Seine Saint-Denis), a Parisian suburb also known as *la deuxième ville malienne* (Mali’s second largest city) (Gonin and Kotlok 2012; Vincent 2013). Related to this presence was the conviction that France needed to assume some sort of responsibility towards the Malian state. The presence of a Malian community on French territory partially blurred the lines between what is a foreign and what is a domestic issue, annihilated the distance between the two countries, and furthered the perceived necessity for action. As one interlocutor explained, ‘it is not only the geography but also the mixture of populations. If you do not deal with the terrorism in Mali one day [unfinished sentence]...we were absolutely convinced that it is easier for a French jihadist to go to Mali than to Syria’.<sup>199</sup> The continuous although declining presence of French expatriates in Africa has a similar effect on the perception of distances. Taken together, the presence of Malian citizens in France and French citizens in Mali led to the cognisance that a radicalisation of the Malian state could not remain without consequences for France.<sup>200</sup> This conviction reflects the increasing impact of the concept of *retour en sécurité intérieure* (impact on domestic security). This doctrine postulates that any action abroad needs to strengthen the nation’s domestic security (Livre Blanc 2008, 57). Vice versa, the concept also implies that the maintenance of France’s domestic security may require military actions abroad.

Temporal, cultural, human, and geographic proximity are mutually reinforcing and contributed to an early recognition of the Malian crisis. They determine French perceptions of Africa in general and help

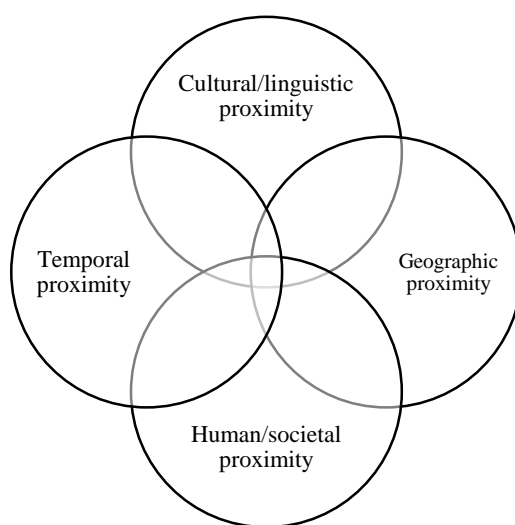
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<sup>198</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014. ‘Troisièmement, un théâtre d’opération que les Français connaissent, parce qu’il suffit qu’ils aillent au café et il y a un Malien avec qui ils peuvent en parler, et le Malien va leur dire « oui, il faut le faire ». La diaspora malienne ici était pour cette opération. Il y a avait un très fort consensus pour cette opération’.

<sup>199</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014. ‘Ce n’est pas seulement la géographie, c’est aussi le mélange des populations. Si on ne traite pas le terrorisme au Mali un jour...[phrase non complétée]. Nous étions absolument convaincus que c’est plus facile pour un djihadiste français d’aller au Mali, qu’en Syrie’. Malians constitute the largest group of sub-Saharan African immigrants in France. For 2010, the INED calculated that 99,011 immigrants of Malian origin live legally in France (Institut national d’études démographiques 2010). Compared to migrants originating from Algeria (1.1 million), Morocco (1 million), Portugal (890,000), Italy (452,000), Tunisia (384,000), Turkey (377,000), or Spain (357,000), the number of Malian migrants is rather small. However, Malians form a very active community within French society.

<sup>200</sup> Camille Grand, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, interview by author, Paris, 23 July 2013.

us understand decision-makers' subjective reading of the situation in Mali. As illustrated in the Venn diagram below (fig. 6), the different dimensions of proximity constitute the *grille d'analyse* (analytical lens) through which French decision-makers perceived the African continent. To summarise the argument in the words of a policy advisor to the president, 'It is our geography that comes through, and the proximity we share with the people of these [francophone African] countries, because of the diasporas, [and] due to our history and our presence we have quite a good knowledge of these countries'.<sup>201</sup>



**Figure 6. The four dimensions of Franco-African proximity**

*Source:* own elaboration

### ***The Military Experience and Expertise***

In addition to the different dimensions of proximity, France's longstanding military experience and its continuous military presence in Africa explain why France was at the forefront of the crisis management from the very beginning. To date the French military remains the most deeply implemented external actor in Africa disposing of an unchallenged combat experience and sophisticated intelligence.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014. '*C'est un peu notre géographie qui parle et notre proximité avec les gens de ces pays, du fait des diasporas, du fait de l'histoire et notre présence qui fait qu'on a une connaissance assez fine de ces pays*'.

<sup>202</sup> As Fleury points out, the French Air Force had made its first experience in fighting mobile pick-up columns in the desert during operation *Lamantin* against Polisario rebels in Mauritania in 1977 (Fleury 2013, 15–20). Koepf (2013b, 287–89), drawing on Kisangani and Pickering's (2009) international military intervention dataset, lists a total of 35 French military interventions in sub-Saharan Africa for the period 1960–2009. If we update this list by

In my opinion, there are two particularities regarding the Ministry of Defence. Its historical ties explain France's military presence in Africa today. France maintains military bases and an important military presence in a certain number of places in Africa. Second, France has still a very fine-grained intelligence network in Africa. France can gather more intelligence in Africa than in Central Asia. And France has more information about francophone Africa than about Anglophone Africa. The knowledge networks (réseaux des connaissances) [and] our diplomatic presence account for the fact that we possess a lot of information. The weight of history, or what history gives us, is exactly that.<sup>203</sup>

The so-called 'Franco-African militarism' that originated during colonial times remains an influential notion both among the French military and many of their francophone African counterparts (Charbonneau 2014, 616). It defines the self-understanding of most French officers and reinforces the conviction of the French Army possessing an unrivalled expertise in conflict resolutions on the African continent. This sentiment of expertise is not limited to the military alone, but politicians and diplomats share the understanding that their foreign policy apparatus in general and their Army in particular benefit from the greatest expertise on the region: 'Why do the other Europeans not intervene? Because undoubtedly they do not have the same level of information. They do not have the capacity to intervene. They do not think they have a particular responsibility to intervene, like we do, because we are permanent member of the UN Security Council'.<sup>204</sup>

French officers continue to stress the common experiences with their African colleagues, which have created empathy and perpetuated the idea of a shared destiny that comes along with a sizeable degree of responsibility (Fleury 2013, 16). As Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Didier Castres puts it, 'the majority of French military operations took place in Africa. We, the military, we all went to Africa when we were young. There is a sort of blending. We went to the same schools with the Africans. Many [African] officers visited schools in France. We have no problem understanding each other. We speak the same

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including the interventions in Côte d'Ivoire (2011), Libya (2011), Mali (2013), and the CAR (2013), France has intervened in total 39 times since 1960.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 16 September 2013. *'La particularité ici, s'agissant du ministère de la Défense, c'est à mon avis deux choses. Ses liens historiques font que la France est militairement présente en Afrique aujourd'hui. Elle a des bases en Afrique, elle a une présence militaire importante en Afrique dans un certain nombre d'endroits. Deuxièmement, elle a encore un réseau de renseignement très dense en Afrique. La France a plus de renseignement en Afrique qu'en Asie centrale. Et elle a plus de renseignement en Afrique francophone, qu'en Afrique anglophone. Les réseaux des connaissances, les présences diplomatiques font qu'on a beaucoup d'informations. Donc, le poids de l'histoire ou ce que l'histoire nous donne c'est ça.'*

<sup>204</sup> Romain Nadal, former spokesperson for François Hollande, interview by author, Paris, 7 October 2013. *'Pourquoi les autres Européens n'interviennent pas? Parce qu'ils n'ont sans doute pas le même degré d'information, ils n'ont pas la même capacité d'intervenir. Ils ne se sentent pas avoir une responsabilité particulière d'intervenir, comme nous le pouvons avoir, parce qu'on est membre permanent au Conseil de Sécurité des Nations Unies.'*

language. We feel connected'.<sup>205</sup> This statement also shows how the different dimensions of proximity play into the military's self-understanding and their conception of France's role in Africa. In particular, the temporal proximity of a historically grown relationship, the human proximity in form of shared experiences, and the cultural proximity with a special reference to the shared language find entrance in the military's mind-set.

Speaking of military expertise, one cannot ignore France's permanent military presence in Africa (*les forces prépositionnées*). The controversial issue of whether or not France should maintain a military presence in Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been subject to severe criticism and led to disagreements between politicians, civil servants, and the military. Information gathered during personal conversations with both civilians and the military confirm that the political and military mind-sets have not always been in accordance with each other on this point. 'Following Sarkozy's speech in Dakar and the 2008 White Book on Defence, Sarkozy wanted us to abandon almost all bases in Africa. We did not follow this through. We understood that this was a mistake'.<sup>206</sup> The military oppose the closure of French bases on the African continent for both pragmatic and identity reasons. As a policy advisor in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasises, the total closure of all military bases in Africa would have produced an identity crisis among the military: 'In some regards the military are turned towards the past. The day there are no longer any forces in Chad will be viewed negatively. The officers who have to implement this decision will themselves have spent some time in their early years in Chad and treasured very good memories'.<sup>207</sup>

The military – civilian divide is not the only schism that characterises this debate. Elected political representatives are very much of two minds on the question of France's military presence in Africa. Proponents consider 'the [presence of] French forces on African soil—in the long run—an undeniable

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<sup>205</sup> Didier Castres, vice chief of staff, interview by author, Paris, 18 February 2014. '*L'essentiel des opérations militaires de la France ont eu lieu en Afrique. Nous, les militaires, on est tous passé par l'Afrique quand on était jeune. Il y a une espèce de brassage. On était dans les mêmes écoles avec les Africains. Beaucoup d'officiers ont visité les écoles en France. On n'a aucune difficulté à se comprendre. On parle la même langue. On se sent lié*'.

<sup>206</sup> Vincent Desportes, general in the French Army, interview by author, Paris, 12 January 2014. '*Après le discours de Sarkozy à Dakar et dans le livre blanc 2008, Sarkozy a voulu qu'on quitte quasiment toutes les bases en Afrique. On n'est pas allé jusqu'au bout. On a compris que c'était une erreur*'.

<sup>207</sup> Interview with civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 5 February 2014. '*De la part des militaires il y a ce côté assez tourné vers le passé. Le jour où il y aura plus de militaire au Tchad ça sera ressenti négativement. Les officiers qui devront prendre la décision ou la mettre en œuvre, eux-mêmes auront passé du temps dans leurs jeunes années au Tchad et ont gardé des très bons souvenirs*'. Chad has been chosen as an example of long-standing Franco-African military relations. Since 1986, the French operation Epervier has been ongoing in Chad.



[strategic] leverage for [their] country'<sup>208</sup> (Assemblée Nationale 2012b) while sceptics suggest to reduce France's military presence in Africa to the minimum and to Europeanise the tasks that the *forces prépositionnées* currently fulfil (Mélonio 2011, 28–33). In particular, the president's diplomatic advisors and several dominant players in the *Quai d'Orsay* have continuously advocated the withdrawal of French forces from Africa. To some extent even society at large is divided on the issue of France's military presence in Africa. As one diplomat summarised bluntly, 'if we were to close the military bases, fifty per cent of the French would say this is a stupidity and the other fifty per cent would say "well-done"''.<sup>209</sup>

As we saw in Chapter One, the division of French society on the question of its military presence in Africa resulted in a policy that proclaimed the reduction of permanently stationed forces but at the same time continued to send troops to the continent as part of punctual French military interventions. The Hollande administration for its part proposed to further reduce the total number of troops stationed permanently in Africa but likewise considered it necessary to remain present on the continent for the time being. As an advisor to the president states, 'the president's idea is, instead of having a few big bases with 2,000 troops (*hommes*) each, to maintain a smaller presence with a few hundred troops (*hommes*) but in more countries. Of course, if the [respective] governments agree.'<sup>210</sup> Adding to this, if one adds those forces that have been part of French interventions the total number of French soldiers in Africa has been kept stable over the past two decades.

With Djibouti, Dakar, Libreville, but also Abidjan, N'Djamena, Niamey, and Gao (as of 2013) the French military maintains several strategic entry points that allow French soldiers to be deployed to the majority of African states within hours. This solution seems to be generally accepted even among the sceptics of the idea of a French permanent presence in Africa, many of whom concede that 'fundamentally, it makes sense to have troops that remain operational in Africa. In fact, being operational in Africa means being operational everywhere. Before leaving for Afghanistan the fighter

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<sup>208</sup> 'À cet égard, les forces françaises présentes, à long terme, sur le sol africain sont un indéniable atout pour notre pays'.

<sup>209</sup> Cyrille Le Déaut, policy advisor at the French embassy, interview by author, Paris, 30 August 2013. 'En gros si on fermait ça, la moitié des Français dirait que c'est une connerie, l'autre moitié dirait bravo'.

<sup>210</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014. 'L'idée du Président c'est d'avoir moins de forces concentrées dans des grosses bases à 2000 hommes, mais d'avoir une présence plus petite avec quelques centaines d'hommes mais dans plus de pays. Évidemment si les gouvernements sont d'accords'.

planes trained in Chadian skies.<sup>211</sup> The Malian crisis was a successful test case for proponents of a continuous French military presence in Africa. Thanks to the *forces prépositionnées* the French military was able to intervene within a few hours following the presidential decision. The military success of the operation in turn confirmed the advocates of a French military implementation in Africa. Future strategic planning will continue to count on the *forces prépositionnées*. Although no troops were stationed in Mali itself before the launching of the Operation Serval, it was the Special Forces present in the neighbouring countries including Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire that were the first to intervene and to stop the advancing rebel fighters. Being present in the region also means being present in Mali, despite the lack of any defence agreement between the two countries.<sup>212</sup>

Though the French military is in favour of a strong and permanent military presence in Africa, they are no reckless warmongers. On the contrary, and in line with previous research, military staff, while more likely to perceive potential threats, 'are risk averse in the actual use of force'. As Horowitz and Stam (2014, 532–33) put it, 'military experience leads to a desire for greater armaments and preparedness, not a greater desire to use force'. Horowitz and Stam come to a different conclusion when analysing the military experience of political leaders and how it affects their likelihood to initiate war. They statistically demonstrate that leaders 'with prior military experience but no combat experience are not just more likely to initiate low-level disputes, but wars' (2014, 544). The three principal actors constituting the decisional triangle under the Hollande administration, Laurent Fabius, Jean-Yves Le Drian, and François Hollande himself all fulfil this criterion. They all have served in the armed forces, however without ever having had any combat experience. Foreign Minister Fabius was with the Navy in Toulon, Defence Minister Le Drian served in the 512<sup>th</sup> train regiment, and President Hollande in the 71<sup>st</sup> engineer regiment. Statements in which François Hollande describes his military service as his

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<sup>211</sup> Interview with civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 5 February 2014. '*Fondamentalement ça a du sens d'avoir des troupes qui reste opérationnel en Afrique. En réalité, être opérationnel en Afrique c'est être opérationnel un peu partout. Les avions de chasse qui s'entraînent au-dessus du Tchad, ils le faisaient avant d'aller en Afghanistan*'.

<sup>212</sup> In 1985, a technical cooperation agreement was signed between Paris and Bamako that provided for the free delivery of a certain amount of French military equipment to Mali, the integration of French officers into the Malian Army, and the possibility for Malian soldiers to conduct internships in France. Articles 2a, 8a, and 11 of the *Accord de coopération militaire technique entre le gouvernement de la République française et le gouvernement de la république du Mali*, accord n°19850175 [http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/exl-php/cadcgp.php?CMD=CHERCHE&QUERY=1&MODELE=vues/mae\\_internet\\_traites/home.html&VUE=mae\\_internet\\_traites&NOM=cadic\\_anonyme&FROM\\_LOGIN=1](http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/exl-php/cadcgp.php?CMD=CHERCHE&QUERY=1&MODELE=vues/mae_internet_traites/home.html&VUE=mae_internet_traites&NOM=cadic_anonyme&FROM_LOGIN=1), accessed on 3 June 2014.

school of life to which he referred to repeatedly in his speeches leading up to Operation Serval (Courage 2013), suggest that this experience shaped the president's mind and to some extent favoured the decision of intervention.

Taken together, the different dimensions of proximity and the longstanding military experience in the sub-Saharan African region help explain why France was at the forefront of the problem solution of the Malian crisis from the start. It is against this backdrop that the increased awareness of French policy-makers, France's calls for a multilateral military intervention, and the drafting of operational plans for an intervention in Mali need to be understood. Having explained the emerging threat perception with reference to the knowledge structures that prevailed among French decision-makers, this chapter will now move on to look into the policy framing and diffusion. Although alert signs had been perceived for quite some time, the veritable cognitive shift away from the alert phase to the action stage occurred only in 2012.

#### 4.2.2 Framing and Diffusion

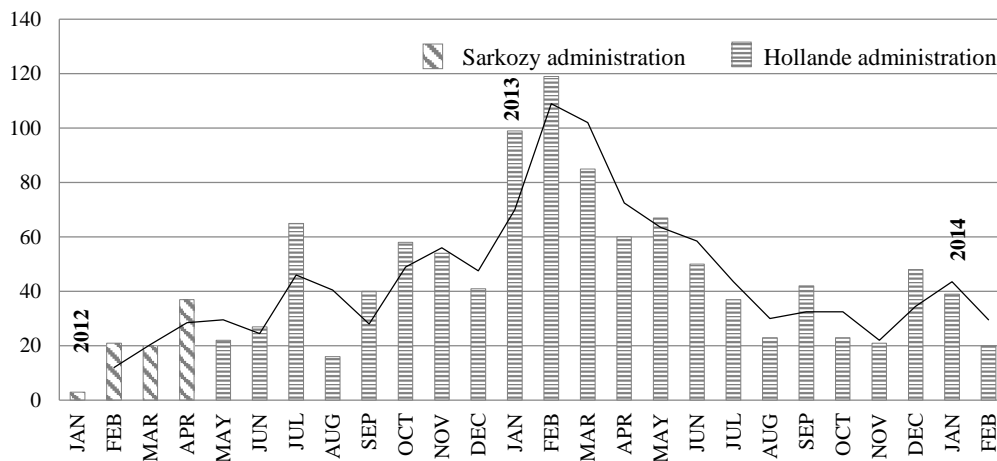
By the time the Hollande administration assumed office in May 2012, few in the French political establishment would have denied the potential threat the Malian crisis represented. A report published by the French Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee in March 2012 concluded that the 'factors of instability that are presently coming together in the Sahel are of such exceptional severity that they justify this region of the African continent being one of our highest priorities' (Assemblée Nationale 2012b, 97).<sup>213</sup> Having reached the point where the French political elites' intersubjectively shared psychological environment became increasingly permissive to an interpretation of the Malian crisis in terms of a high-level risk not only for the region, but also for France and Europe, the decision-making process entered its next stage: the policy-framing phase.

This stage of the decision-making process is characterised by increased discursive activity. From May to December 2012, the Hollande administration produced an average of forty official foreign policy

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<sup>213</sup> *'Les facteurs d'instabilité qui se conjuguent aujourd'hui au Sahel sont d'une gravité exceptionnelle qui justifie que cette région du continent africain soit l'une de nos toutes premières priorités'.*

declarations on the crisis in Mali per month. This represents a one hundred per cent increase compared to the period from January to May 2012. As shown in figure 7, a first peak in the production of official statements was reached in July 2012, and—after a sharp decline in August—followed by a steady increase over the following months.<sup>214</sup> Put differently, the issue emerged as the top priority on France’s foreign policy agenda.



**Figure 7. Official foreign policy statements by members of the French government on the situation in Mali**  
*Source: own elaboration, based on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs basedoc database*

This quantitative increase was accompanied by a qualitative shift. France’s official position moved away from the observation phase to a definition of the security problem followed by calls for its resolution. In order to understand how French decision-makers managed the leap from the definition of the problem to potential solutions, one needs to engage with those elements in the French discourse that are necessary for the framing and the diffusion of the policy issue.

The way problems are framed in the policy-making process is ‘crucial, especially at the agenda-setting stage, since [their] definition and the identification of possible implications at that stage may affect the selection of solutions in the decision-making stage’ (Sicurelli 2008, 219). As mentioned in Chapter One, in situations of high complexity actors ‘apply heuristics that facilitate information processing and decision making’ (Weyland 2009, 408). Time pressure and limited human perception

<sup>214</sup> The small number of official statements in August 2012 is due to the reduced activity of the French state during the month of August.

and reaction capabilities with regards to complex situations require decision-makers to produce a simplified model of the situations they face. These models minimise doubts and provide the decision-maker and the audience with a manageable list of options. Simplified models of reality are expressed in form of narratives that characterise the political discourse and become part of the decision-makers' mental maps.

As stated above, the Malian crisis was given top priority by the Hollande administration from early on. Almost all questions related to the security situation in Mali were immediately handled at the peak of the decisional hierarchy where much of the framing occurred.<sup>215</sup> Drawing on the information by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, the military and the DGSE, the president's advisors produced an evaluation of the situation, which prompted François Hollande to announce two weeks after his election that a military intervention would be necessary to solve the Malian crisis (Hollande 2012c). Such an intervention, however, was not to be led by France but should take the form of a pan-African peacekeeping force (AFISMA) under the direction of ECOWAS. Hollande was explicit about the fact that he did not intend to send French combat troops and firmly retained this position until December 2012 (Notin 2014, 123). The European Union for its part should put in place a training mission to form a new generation of Malian soldiers (EUTM). AFISMA and EUTM were understood to be complimentary and together should constitute the riposte of an international community united in the fight against terrorism. France's role was to support the deployment of the AFISMA and to act as the overall coordinator/facilitator (*facilitateur*) between the different national and international actors. This role was compatible with the non-interventionist stance the Hollande administration had chosen as trademark of its foreign policy. Both the determination to break with France's past military activity on the African continent and the desire to produce a foreign policy that would be in coherence with the complete withdrawal of French troops from Afghanistan forbade any references to a unilateral French intervention. To make intervention possible, the conflict in Mali was framed as a direct threat to the international security and in particular to the security of Europe.

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<sup>215</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014.

### ***The Definition of the Enemy***

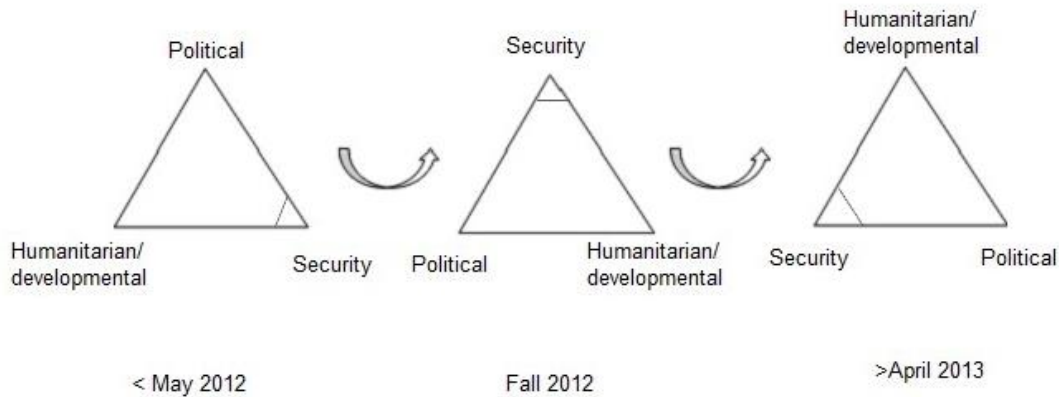
While the Tuareg rebellion and the military putsch received considerable attention during the first half of 2012, these elements were increasingly disregarded in light of the rising prominence of the activities of AQIM, MUJAO, and Anṣār ad-Dīn. During a state visit of Niger's President Mahamadou Issoufou in Paris, President Hollande indicated that the veritable threat of the crisis lies in 'the implementation of terrorist groups in the north of Mali'. The unspoken understanding was that Islamist terrorism had to be overcome *before* any political solution could be envisaged. This is in contrast to the earlier official discourse, which put the political situation in the south at the core of the problem resolution (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2012b).<sup>216</sup> While French decision-makers regarded the Malian crisis from a security, developmental, and political point of view, the three factors did not receive the same degrees of attention.

On several occasions the French government emphasised its strict non-negotiations policy with terrorist groups (Hollande 2012g), meaning that putting an end to the activities of AQIM, MUJAO, and Anṣār ad-Dīn would require some military action. In other words, decision-makers as of May 2012 and more particularly since October 2012 had started to securitise the Malian crisis by giving priority to a potential terrorist threat. On 4 October 2012, Gérard Araud argued, 'we agree that we need a political solution, but we also need a military solution' (Araud 2012c).<sup>217</sup> This statement by the French representative at the UN depicts the moment when the French position shifted away from a political solution to a securitisation of the crisis.

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<sup>216</sup> Until July 2012, terrorism, rather than being considered the major problem, was framed as deriving from the general instability that prevailed in the country and across the region (Araud 2012b).

<sup>217</sup> '*Nous sommes d'accord qu'il faut faire du politique, mais il faut aussi faire du militaire*'.



**Figure 8. The three components of the conflict resolution and their hierarchical order over time**<sup>218</sup>  
*Source:* own elaboration

By looking at the importance each of the three components received within the discourse at any given stage of the decision-making process, one can trace a gradual development away from the political to a military solution during the second half of 2012. The developmental side of the conflict resolution came only to the fore in the aftermath of the intervention (fig. 8).

Giving preference to the security dimension seems to be at least partially in conflict with the more comprehensive approach the French administration was advocating publicly. As expressed in a great number of official statements and stipulated in UN resolution 2071 the political, developmental/humanitarian, and security dimensions of the crisis should be treated simultaneously and with equal importance (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2012c). This triangular approach builds on widely shared understanding according to which development and security are inextricably interlinked (Stern and Öjendal 2010). This view is neither new nor particular to the French government. In fact, the European Union’s policy agenda since the early 2000s has been informed by this ‘understanding of the links between development, good governance and security’ (Bagayoko-Penone and Gibert 2009, 790).

Following 9/11, the debate on the GWoT advanced the view that ‘failed states [left unaddressed] are a potential safe haven for terrorists’ (Menkhaus 2004, 152). The development-security nexus implies that ‘policies towards security may become one part of development policy because in so far as they enhance security, they will contribute to development; and policies towards development may become

<sup>218</sup> The triangular illustration draws on a metaphor introduced by Laurent Fabius (2012e).

part of security policies because enhanced development increases security’ (Stewart 2004, 2).<sup>219</sup> If one adds to this picture the belief in good governance and the rule of law, one arrives at the interpretation advanced above according to which any strategy to resolve the Malian crisis must take into account the political, developmental, and security dimensions. The French vice-representative to the UN confirms the French elites’ belief in this three-dimensional approach when saying, ‘the elimination of conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, requires the implementation not only of security policies but also of development and good-governance programmes. This can be done by, for example, putting in place regional strategies. This is the approach taken by the European Union, whose Sahel strategy has both a security track and a development track’ (Briens 2012).<sup>220</sup> Although they may read like excerpts from a political science textbook, such statements are more than simply rhetorical devices to please the international community. During interviews in Paris, the great majority of interlocutors affirmed their firm belief in the security-development nexus, which guided their analytical lenses and thus their propositions towards the resolution of the crisis.<sup>221</sup> As one policy advisor stated, ‘I do not know how you analyse all this, but one thing that is certain is that there is no “either security or development”. These two are interrelated, and they need to advance together. To separate the two for the benefit of the one or the other is absurd. This doesn’t make any sense. This would create a succession of failures. The two must be linked...’.<sup>222</sup>

Indeed, the different elements were treated as being linked, but not necessarily considered as being of equal importance. After the security component had moved to the top of the discursive triangle the

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<sup>219</sup> It is worthy to note that the assumption that development must become part of security policies only truly applied after the French intervention, that is, during the post-conflict phase. Prior to that, the discourse indeed stressed the importance of development on security, but was contradicted by the applied practices. The suspension of development aid to Mali after the military coup in March 2012 suggests a discrepancy between discourse and practices.

<sup>220</sup> ‘...l’élimination des conditions propices à la propagation du terrorisme doit passer non seulement par la mise en place de politiques de sécurité mais également par la conduite de programmes en faveur du développement et de la bonne gouvernance’.

<sup>221</sup> It should be noted that this is not a specificity of France. Since the late 1990s the ‘EU’s increased attention to security issues has spilled over onto its development agenda’ (Broberg 2013, 680–81). One may even speak if not of a global so at least of a Western consensus regarding the idea of an existing nexus between development and security.

<sup>222</sup> Xavier Collignon, vice-director of the DAS, interview by author, Paris, 6 August 2013. ‘Je ne sais pas comment vous analysez tout ça, mais il y a une chose qui est certaine, c’est qu’il n’y a pas soit la sécurité, soit le développement. Il y a une vraie intégration des deux, et chacun doit avancer... ensemble. Dissocier les deux au profit de l’un ou de l’autre, c’est absurde. Ça ne rime à rien. Ce sont des échecs successifs. Il faut qu’ils soient liés...’.



identification and labelling of the threat begun. The identification of terrorism in the Sahel region as both the underlying cause of the Malian crisis and its most serious consequence enhanced the need for a military solution even further. The definition of terrorist groups, as advanced by the Hollande administration, encompassed insurgents, criminals, and any other fighting forces who did not dissociate themselves explicitly from an extremist Islamist ideology. Such a comprehensive definition of terrorism allowed the French government to paint a simple and straightforward picture of a ruthless enemy, as the following statement by Foreign Minister Fabius illustrates. While this definition did not necessarily account for the various factions between the different insurgent movements, it allowed for the establishment of a narrative that would later justify the French intervention.

Sometimes we call them kidnapers, which seems a neutral term. These are terrorists, people who do not hesitate to kill, who live off plunder and crime, who rape, who act outside all rules of humanity. This is what we are talking about. Thus, it is evident that when confronted with people of this kind, not only France but also the international community cannot accept their doings (Fabius 2012j).<sup>223</sup>

Hollande when discussing the security situation in northern Mali argued that ‘this is no liberation movement, this is an external intervention that destabilises a country, Mali, and that brings forward groups whose vocation is an intervention that exceeds the Malian territory, and concerns Africa and may even affect other regions. This threat, it exists.’ (Hollande 2012b).<sup>224</sup> Two points are worth noting. First, Hollande emphasised that the Malian conflict had to be understood in terms of a hostile, foreign intervention and not a domestic conflict. This is insofar important as the option of the Malian crisis being a domestic conflict or civil war would have foreclosed any French involvement at an early stage.

As has been shown in Chapter One, in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide and against the backdrop of the severe criticism against France’s interventionism in Africa, French policy-makers adopted what they called a new approach to Africa’s security. Under the label *ni ingérence ni indifférence* (neither inference, nor indifference) diplomats and the military ‘reviewed their strategy

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<sup>223</sup> ‘On dit parfois ravisseurs - c'est un mot qui apparaît neutre comme ça - il s'agit de terroristes, de gens qui n'hésitent pas à tuer, qui vivent de la rapine, du crime, qui violent, qui sont en dehors des règles de l'humanité. C'est de cela dont on parle. Il est donc évident que lorsqu'on a, en face de soi, des personnes de cet acabit, non pas seulement la France mais la communauté internationale ne peut pas admettre la poursuite de ces agissements’.

<sup>224</sup> ‘Il y a une menace d'installation de groupes terroristes au Nord Mali. Il ne s'agit pas d'un mouvement de libération, il y a une intervention extérieure qui déstabilise un pays, le Mali, et qui installe des groupes dont la vocation est une intervention qui va bien au-delà du Mali, en Afrique et peut-être au-delà. Donc cette menace, elle existe’.

towards the [African] continent' (Merchet 1998). In line with the ongoing normalisation process that was intended to put an end to the old habits of the *gendarme d'Afrique*, Paris announced that the times when the French military were the first in line were over. In their discourses, French decision-makers defended the argument that Africa's security had to be established by African countries themselves or under an international mandate. Most importantly, France was determined and in some cases legally bound to not get involved in conflicts over domestic political contestations of power. Thus, distinguishing between 'terrorist groups' and the MNLA was a way for the president to affirm coherence with previous policies and to emphasise that France was not taking part in a domestic conflict to stabilise the incumbent regime. Second, by evoking the possible implications on other regions, the president referred to the contagious effect the crisis could have on the entire West-African region and eventually even Europe (see below).

With the shift towards a more security orientated approach to the crisis-solution in Mali, comparisons with Afghanistan mushroomed in the official discourse. The neologism *Sahelistan* (Laurent 2013), used to describe a region of instability, vulnerable to drug trafficking and religious fanaticism, found entrance into the public discourse where it subsequently gained increasing popularity. The most ardent advocate and user of this term was Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius (2012h): 'What is about to develop in the north of Mali represents a risk for everyone. I am frequently referring to *Sahelistan*, that is, the equivalent of Afghanistan in the Sahel. Indeed, you are confronted with a good number of people who are terrorists, who have many weapons, lots of money, and who kidnap people. All this adds to the drug trafficking' (Fabius 2012i).<sup>225</sup>

The parallels that were drawn between Afghanistan and the situation in Mali served two specific purposes.<sup>226</sup> First, the use of this analogy was motivated by the necessity to produce a simplified narrative of the situation and to create the impression of facing a familiar situation. Referring to Afghanistan rendered a complex situation more comprehensible to the French actors themselves as well as to the recipients of the official discourse, that is, domestic and international audiences. Decision-

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<sup>225</sup> 'Ce qui est en train de se développer au nord-Mali représente un risque pour tout le monde. Moi je parle souvent de «Sahelistan» c'est-à-dire l'équivalent de l'Afghanistan au Sahel. En effet, vous avez là des personnes assez nombreuses qui sont des terroristes qui ont beaucoup d'armes, beaucoup d'argent et qui font des prises d'otages. Tout cela se mêle aux trafics de drogue'.

<sup>226</sup> Others described Mali as another Somalia.

makers confronted with new situations whose outcomes are yet unknown rely on comparisons with what they perceive to be similar cases from the past to make sense of current challenges and overcome uncertainty. In his seminal work *Analogies at War*, Khong (1992, 252–53) shows that analogies ‘perform diagnostic or inferential tasks’ and affect decision outcomes by making ‘certain options more attractive and others less so’. François Hollande’s (2013p) statement that ‘history...teaches us always what we have to do tomorrow’ is suggestive of the important role historical analogies play during the decision-making process.<sup>227</sup> According to Khong (1992, 253), analogies ‘matter most during the selection and rejection of policy options, and they exert their impact by influencing the assessments and evaluations that policy-makers must make in order to choose between alternative options’. Moreover, analogies are also used to justify and advocate the chosen policy options (1992, 252). In the extract cited above, Fabius (2012h) proposes an easily understandable narrative that is free of doubts and that identifies a very specific threat: terrorism. Moving the observed facts into the realm of the familiar is a means to exude confidence among the audience. By using historical analogies, decision-makers implicitly transmit the message of “we recognise the danger; we know how to deal with it”.

Second, the Afghanistan analogy portrayed a “high-risk” environment and hinted to the implications the implementation of terrorist elements in the Sahel may have for the entire international community and in particular for Europe. As one observer of French politics noted, ‘The two most serious [foreign policy] crises for us are Syria and Mali [but] Mali is top of the list. In Mali we have an Afghanistan, a Somalia being created in the North. And the target is not the US: it is France’ (quoted in Usher 2012). Hence, the Afghanistan analogy allowed not only for drawing parallels between different situations in order to allow for their comprehension but also helped to predict possible negative consequences of a non-intervention. The view prevailed among the president’s advisors that Mali, should it fall into the hands of extremists, would become a rear base for terrorists to prepare attacks on Europe. As one advisor put it, ‘We saw how the 11 September attacks had been organised from Afghanistan’.<sup>228</sup> In October, Jean-Yves Le Drian used the same analogy to argue for a timely intervention: ‘When we intervened in Afghanistan in 2001, it was in the aftermath of the 09/11 attacks. Let us not wait that such a tragedy

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<sup>227</sup> ‘...l’histoire qui nous renseigne toujours sur ce que nous avons à faire pour demain’.

<sup>228</sup> Romain Nadal, former spokesperson for François Hollande, interview by author, Paris, 7 October 2013. ‘On a bien vu comment depuis l’Afghanistan ont été organisés les attentats du 11 septembre’.

repeats itself' (Le Drian 2012c).<sup>229</sup>

During autumn 2012, references to a terrorist threat and its implications on France's national security became increasingly explicit. President Hollande, speaking in front of the Senegalese National Assembly, defined the crisis in Mali as a direct attack on France.

But are we here to analyse, to try to understand, or to take our responsibilities? The ongoing horrors cannot continue. How can we accept all these profaned mausoleums, these chopped off hands, these raped women? How can we tolerate that children are enrolled by the militia, that terrorists come to this region to then spread their terror elsewhere? France, I am saying it clearly, via its expatriates in this region, was directly attacked.<sup>230</sup> (Hollande 2012k)

References to the atrocities committed by those groups labelled as terrorists included rape, decapitation, religious fundamentalism, the recruiting of child soldiers, and the destruction of cultural sites, in particular the mausoleums in Timbuktu (Fabius 2012a). Beyond the mere reporting of observable facts, which may be excerpt from a somewhat more complex situation, these eerie descriptions of the atrocities committed in northern Mali together with the repeated references to Afghanistan emphasised the need for immediate action.<sup>231</sup> The use of the Sahelistan, or as some dub it, *Afrighanistan* narrative bears a considerable risk insofar as it amplifies a threat by contributing to its construction (Keenan 2013). Rekawek (2014, 19) brings it to the point when arguing that the Western narrative of,

Afghani-style terrorist statelets proliferating in Africa and threatening not only their immediate neighbours but also the West...fails to account for the far less straightforward reality on the ground... [and] risks giving the Sahel terrorist too much publicity – and by extension credibility – and creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of the impending triumph of global jihadism in the southern neighbourhood of the European Union.

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<sup>229</sup> *'Quand nous sommes intervenus en Afghanistan en 2001, c'était au lendemain des attaques du 11 Septembre. N'attendons pas qu'un tel drame se reproduise pour agir'.*

<sup>230</sup> *'Mais sommes-nous là pour faire des analyses, pour essayer de comprendre, ou pour prendre nos responsabilités ? Les horreurs actuelles ne peuvent plus se poursuivre. Comment accepter ces mausolées profanés, ces mains coupées, ces femmes violées ? Comment tolérer que des enfants puissent être enrôlés de force par des milices, que des terroristes viennent dans cette région pour ensuite semer la terreur ailleurs ? La France, je l'ai dit aussi, à travers ses ressortissants dans cette région, a été attaquée et agressée'.*

<sup>231</sup> The Afghanistan analogy also affected the conduct of the military operations. As Colonel Michel Goya points out, the military intervention was guided by the principle of avoiding the mistakes committed during the campaign in Afghanistan. Consequently, all operational planning concentrated on a short military intervention. Any sort of stalemate that would keep the French Army for a long time in a state of guerrilla warfare had to be avoided. Michel Goya, colonel, interview by author, Paris, 10 January 2014.

In the same speech, President Hollande outlined his understanding of the scope of the conflict and explained in front of a principally West African audience why not only France but the entire European Union should be concerned with the developments in the Sahara. The president affirmed, ‘it is not only your security threatened [by the Malian crisis], but also ours, the security of Europe, a Europe which knows the invaluable importance of peace...this Europe that made and still makes peace (fait la paix), this Europe also needs to make and to want peace in Africa every time there is a conflict or terrorism’ (Hollande 2012k).<sup>232</sup> By framing Mali’s security as a prolongation of Europe’s security, the president subscribed to the idea of Europe and Africa being two interrelated entities.

### *A Threat to Europe?*

References to Europe’s security were not simply neutral observations, but served a specific purpose. By framing the Malian crisis as a ‘danger not only to Mali, but to the whole of Africa and Europe’ (Fabius 2012o), France’s European partners were alerted to the severity of the situation and encouraged to participate in the conflict resolution. In June 2012, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius affirmed his commitment to ‘...make [his] colleagues sensitive to this conflict of which one speaks less than of other conflicts, but which has the potential to severely degenerate, and this only a few hundreds of kilometres from us’ (Fabius 2012b).<sup>233</sup> Over the course of the second half of 2012, these statements multiplied and became increasingly affirmative. In fact, the framing of the Malian conflict in terms of a potential threat to Europe is the second most frequently cited concept that emerged from the qualitative analysis conducted for this study. At the European Council on September 26-27 2012, Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian urged his colleagues to ‘...concretise a European mission to support ECOWAS and the central government in Bamako in stabilising Mali to avoid the creation of a sanctuary for terrorists’

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<sup>232</sup> *‘C’est votre sécurité qui est en jeu, c’est aussi la nôtre, celle de l’Europe qui connaît la valeur inestimable de la paix pour laquelle elle a obtenu aujourd’hui même le Prix Nobel. Cette Europe qui a fait la paix, qui fait la paix, cette Europe, elle doit aussi faire la paix et vouloir la paix en Afrique chaque fois qu’il y a un conflit et du terrorisme’.*

<sup>233</sup> *‘Mais je veux - je vais le faire dans un instant - sensibiliser mes collègues parce que c’est un conflit dont on parle moins que d’autres conflits mais qui peut dégénérer de façon grave et même très grave, et ceci à quelques centaines de kilomètres de chez nous’.*

(Ambassade de France à Nicosie 2012).<sup>234</sup> In October, Le Drian became more explicit about the target and the consequences of the terrorist threat by saying ‘their aim is to take action beyond the borders of the Malian state to hit Europe. If we do not act, we will be the victims. Protecting Mali’s sovereignty will guarantee Europe’s security’ (Le Drian 2012b).<sup>235</sup> Once again, a still unknown outcome was presented as an easily comprehensible truism.

Although the statements above constituted a means of attracting Europe’s interest for the situation in Mali,<sup>236</sup> they were more than simply ‘a convenient narrative which benefits both the propaganda machine of Islamists and the calls of those in the West who support military action’, as some pundits seem to suggest (Hellmich 2013). Instead, they were inspired by a real fear that ‘a state the size of Mali that falls for terrorism is a state that then will prepare attacks thousands of kilometres beyond its borders’.<sup>237</sup> As one presidential advisor pointed out, ‘what is happening in the Sahel region—geographically speaking—is not very far from us. This is our neighbourhood. If the problems are not dealt with on site, in a couple of years they will be here with us [in Europe]’.<sup>238</sup> Adding to this, a genuine conviction existed ‘among French political elites that their vision of Europe [’s involvement in Africa] was what was best for their partners’ (Treacher 2003, 53). This conviction continues to influence France’s understanding of a Common Security and Defence Policy and results in the French government remaining the strongest supporter of a proactive European Defence policy.

The decision-makers I interviewed confirmed unanimously that ahead of the French military intervention they had been seriously worried about an escalation of the Malian crisis because of the potential implications such an outcome could have had on the security of France and Europe. A report published by the French Senate corroborates these findings when arguing, ‘Africa is too close, both in

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<sup>234</sup> ‘À cette occasion, Jean-Yves Le Drian a défendu la concrétisation d’un format européen de soutien à la CEDEAO et au gouvernement de Bamako pour stabiliser le Mali et éviter la formation d’un nouveau sanctuaire terroriste’.

<sup>235</sup> ‘Leur objectif consiste à agir au-delà des frontières du Mali pour frapper l’Europe. Si nous ne prenons pas de mesure, nous en serons victimes. Préserver l’intégrité du Mali c’est garantir la sécurité de l’Europe’.

<sup>236</sup> General Eric Bonnemaison, director of the DAS, interview by author, Paris, 27 August 2013.

<sup>237</sup> Romain Nadal, former spokesperson of François Hollande, interview by author, Paris, 7 October 2013. ‘C’est une menace régionale avec un risque pour la sécurité de l’Europe, parce qu’un État qui basculerait dans le terrorisme à l’échelle du Mali, c’est un état qui pourrait ensuite préparer des attentats à des milliers de kilomètres de là’.

<sup>238</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014. ‘...ce qui se passe dans la région du Sahel n’est pas très éloigné géographiquement de nous. C’est vraiment notre voisinage. Si les problèmes ne sont pas traités sur place dans quelques années ils seront chez nous’.

terms of geography as well as population (*en termes de population*), for Europe not to be concerned when observing the multiplication of “fragile states” in that region’ (Sénat 2013, 475).<sup>239</sup> The view that a state collapse in Mali inevitably will lead to terrorist attacks on European soil can be explained by looking at France’s painful experience with terrorism during the Algerian civil war in the 1990s and the notion of geographical proximity. Both make French decision-makers’ feel particularly vulnerable.<sup>240</sup> It is noteworthy that this view is not limited to the political *field* but shared across the French society. A good number of voices from academia and the media confirmed the potential threat Mali constituted for the entire European continent (Laidi 2013; Lasserre and Oberlé 2013, 48; 220-221; Laurent 2013, 319).

Similar to the domino theory during the Cold War, French actors referred to a proliferation of the terrorist threat across the West-African region, which by then had become an inevitable truism: ‘Between a proven risk and a hypothetical risk, one needs first resolve the proven risk. And today this risk is the presence of AQIM in northern Mali. To do nothing means taking the risk that AQIM will contaminate—via a spill over—other countries in that region and even more than today become a threat to France, its expatriates, and interests’ (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2012e).<sup>241</sup> Fabius repeatedly emphasised that ‘terrorism is not something that stops at any given border. Mali is divided in two, and this can affect the neighbouring countries, that is, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Senegal, and Côte d’Ivoire; and even the entire African continent’ (Fabius 2012n).<sup>242</sup> Interviews at the Ministry of Defence and the Élysée confirmed that this domino theory of terrorism was also shared by these two decision-units.<sup>243</sup> When the French president later had to weigh the costs and benefits of a unilateral strike a few months later, the idea of a likely proliferation of the terrorist threat was on the side of the latter. A personal advisor of Foreign Minister Le Drian describes France’s interest for the region as follows:

It [France] has always been interested [in the region], however for different reasons, sometimes to interfere in the political process, sometimes to not interfere anymore, and sometimes—and this is

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<sup>239</sup> ‘L’Afrique est trop proche, tant au sens géographique qu’en termes de population, de l’Europe pour que l’on puisse y voir se multiplier des « États fragiles » sans que l’Europe ne soit directement concernée’.

<sup>240</sup> Adding to this, AQIM had declared France its archenemy, reinforcing concerns in Paris.

<sup>241</sup> ‘Entre un risque avéré et un risque hypothétique, il faut déjà régler le risque avéré. Et le risque avéré aujourd’hui c’est la présence d’AQMI au Nord Mali. Ne rien faire, c’est prendre le risque de voir AQMI, par un effet de contagion, contaminer d’autres pays de cette région et menacer plus encore qu’elles ne le font déjà aujourd’hui la France, ses ressortissants et ses intérêts’.

<sup>242</sup> ‘...le terrorisme ce n’est pas quelque chose qui s’arrête à telle ou telle frontière. Le Mali est coupé en deux et cela peut toucher les pays voisins, c’est-à-dire le Niger, le Burkina Faso, la Mauritanie, le Sénégal et la Côte d’Ivoire ; et puis l’ensemble des pays d’Afrique’.

<sup>243</sup> Romain Nadal, former spokesperson for François Hollande, interview by author, Paris, 7 October 2013.

the case of François Hollande—to help those states to build their own security system on solid pillars, because if one fragile state in the heart of Africa [referring to West Africa] falls, it is the entire Sahel region that falls.<sup>244</sup>

The most explicit expression of a sentiment of interrelatedness between Africa and Europe in the French political discourse can be found in the concept of *Eurafrique*. *Eurafrique* ‘is a body of thought, originating in the colonial period, according to which the fate of Europe and Africa is seen as being naturally and inextricably linked at the political, economic, social, and cultural levels’ (Martin 1982, 222). This geopolitical vision is biased towards francophone Africa and views France as the relationship’s *pièce maîtresse* (centrepiece) (Liniger-Goumaz 1972, 39). In his critique of Western colonialism and neo-colonialism in Africa, Guy Martin (1982, 226) dates the emergence of the term *Eurafrique* back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and attributes its initial diffusion to journalists, writers, businessmen, and politicians close to the colonial lobby, including the French Prime Minister Joseph Caillaux and the political scientist Eugène Guernier.<sup>245</sup> In a series of papers published in the 1930s, Eugène Guernier (1933) elaborated on the geographical complementarity of the African and European continents (Dramé and Saul 2004, 97), which he and other early Eurafrikanists understood as natural and indispensable, and therefore desirable (Liniger-Goumaz 1972, 26). Throughout the Third Republic, Africa was perceived as a natural extension of Europe, and together the two continents would create a ‘viable autonomous entity’ (Liniger-Goumaz 1972, 278). Former Prime Minister Joseph Caillaux was convinced that ‘Europe...can’t save itself and its civilisation...if it doesn’t unite itself...with the vast dark continent, which nature has placed under its [Europe’s] dominance’ (quoted in Guernier 1933, 91). After the Second World War *Eurafrique* became a means that allowed political elites to preserve France’s Great Power status without having to formally hold on to the old Empire, which by then had already entered the process of decolonisation (Dramé and Saul 2004, 96–97; Treacher

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<sup>244</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 16 September 2013. ‘*Elle s’y était tout le temps intéressée, mais pour des raisons différentes, parfois pour s’ingérer dans le processus politique, parfois pour ne plus du tout s’y ingérer, et puis parfois pour aider ces états là—c’est le cas de François Hollande—à bâtir leurs systèmes de sécurité sur des piliers solides, parce qu’un état faible au cœur de l’Afrique (l’Afrique du nord, le Sahel) c’est tout le Sahel qui tombe*’.

<sup>245</sup> Dramé and Saul (2004, 96–97) locate the emergence of the concept at a slightly earlier point in time: Journalists and geographers are said to have already employed the term during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The authors agree, however, that the first systematic formulation of the concept occurred during the 1930s, most notably through the writings of Henry de Jouvenel and Eugène Guernier.



2003, 122). During the first phase of the Cold War and conditioned by the technological advancements in modern weaponry—notably by the emergence of long-distance missiles—Africa gained strategic importance. Providing an area of retreat and a position from where a counter-charge could be launched, the African continent was considered to strengthen Europe’s defence capabilities. Similar to the Monroe Doctrine, the Eurafrikan space should demarcate a European zone of influence.

After having fallen into oblivion for almost three decades, the term reached new prominence by the mid-1990s. In light of the criticism that emerged against the *Françafrique* system, Europe ‘offered both material and moral resources’ (Charbonneau 2014, 620) to renew the French–African relationship. Building on the perceived interrelatedness between the two continents, Europe soon became the preferred multilateral framework of reference for French activism in its former colonies. As Charbonneau (2008a, 279) points out, ‘the EU has usually represented the hope of a new type of interventionism, one that is multilateral and multinational and thus, by definition, one that is more legitimate and less susceptible of accusations of neo-colonialism’.<sup>246</sup> In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the view prevailed that Europe could increase France’s power in the world.<sup>247</sup> For Yates (2012, 332) ‘Europe permits France to exercise an influence corresponding fairly well to its geostrategic ambitions. As a small world power but a large European power, France can hope to find in the EU a relay, a way of accessing an international role that it refuses to renounce’. Succeeding French governments have reached out for Europe to amplify France’s impact in Africa. Following the initial euphoria in the early 2000s, French officials became more sceptical when realising that the operationalisation of EUFOR Chad and European Union Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) Sahel Niger did not reflect the approach France intended to advance. Additionally, Europe, whilst acquiring increasing competences on the African continent, did not help to increase France’s own influence in the world.<sup>248</sup> Consequently, the idea of legitimisation replaced the amplification of power as the principal motivation of France’s strive

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<sup>246</sup> Charbonneau (2008a) argues that references to Europe do not make France’s defence policy in Africa any more legitimate. For Charbonneau the French rhetoric may have changed since Maastricht, however the practices on the ground have not. For Charbonneau French (neo-)colonial tradition and EU multilateralism are not incompatible. Elsewhere, Charbonneau criticises European peacekeeping operations in Africa for being an expression of a Europeanised French hegemony (Charbonneau 2008b, 119; Charbonneau 2008a) and states ‘the *gendarme* has simply put on a cloak of multilateral humanitarianism’ (2008a, 293).

<sup>247</sup> Interview with senior civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 18 July 2013.

<sup>248</sup> Interview with senior civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 18 July 2013.

for a common European approach (Charbonneau 2008a).<sup>249</sup>

The end of the Cold War had made Europe become increasingly active in its Eastern neighbourhood and aroused the fear among French politicians and diplomats that this strategic reorientation would make Africa sink into oblivion. No one expressed this fear more eloquently than former Minister of Cooperation Jacques Pelletier when saying, ‘The wind from the east shook the coconut palms.’<sup>250</sup> This suspicion was not aided by the fact that the EU—with exception of the Balkan region, the participation in the Afghanistan war, and small-scale peacekeeping operations—has been largely absent from international security matters (Larsen 2002, 294–95). French policy-makers have considered it their mission to convince their European partners of the strategic importance of the African continent. To pitch the idea of a common defence and security strategy in Africa to other European states, French decision-makers have relied on a double-edged discourse that emphasises simultaneously the risks and benefits Europe has to expect from the region (Livre Blanc 2013, 56). Policy-makers referred to Africa’s future economic potential and the elevated terrorist threat almost in the same breath.

However, these interdependencies do not only concern the risks and threats, but in themselves constitute opportunities. The demographic explosion and Africa’s economic take-off are good news for Europe as well as for the emerging countries that invest in Africa massively. In a world where the centre of gravity is shifting towards Asia, can Europe and France find the driving force of their future growth in Africa? (Sénat 2013, 25)<sup>251</sup>

Some authors interpreted this double-sided discourse of risks and opportunities as an expression of France’s Africa policy being in a ‘state of confusion’ (Bovcon 2013). In contrast I would argue that this make-or-break attitude is in fact a well-elaborated strategy that is intended to convince even the most reluctant European partner of the advantages of a European approach to the continent. Former President Sarkozy’s claim to renew the French-African relationship by breaking from the past did not stop the former president from advocating a Eurafrikan alliance. On the contrary, in his much criticised speech

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<sup>249</sup> The pro-European attitude in the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs decreased to some extent and made room for scepticism, in particular regarding the operational level, following the EUFOR Chad/CAR and EUCAP Niger missions in 2008, which were considered as partial failures; Interview with senior civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 18 July 2013.

<sup>250</sup> ‘Le vent de l’Est secoue les cocotiers’ (Krosiak 2004, 67).

<sup>251</sup> ‘Mais ces interdépendances ne concernent pas seulement les risques et les menaces, elles portent en elles des opportunités. L’explosion démographique et le décollage économique de l’Afrique sont une bonne nouvelle pour l’Europe comme pour les pays émergents qui y investissent massivement. Dans un monde dont le centre de gravité est en train de se déplacer vers l’Asie, l’Europe et la France peuvent-elles éventuellement trouver dans l’Afrique un moteur de leur croissance future ?’

at the University of Dakar in July 2007,<sup>252</sup> Sarkozy made a case for a Eurafrican Union: ‘Together with Africa, France wants to herald the arrival of *Eurafrique*, this grand common destiny that awaits both Europe and Africa’ (Sarkozy 2007). Similar to early Eurafricanists in the 1930s, the former president linked Europe’s economic and political future to the emergence of the African continent. Comparable ideas can be found across the entire political spectrum. In her 2011 book *Pour une Europe juste*, Élisabeth Guigou, socialist MP and chairwoman of the Commission of Foreign Affairs in the French National Assembly, writes that Europe—in light of the recent financial crisis—needs to unite itself with the Mediterranean and the sub-Saharan African regions in order to maintain prosperity and wealth. Guigou (2011, 168) fears Europe is falling prey to power struggles between the United States and China.<sup>253</sup> The only way for Europe to avoid such a fate lies in its capability of building a Euro-Mediterranean and, in the long term, a Euro-African union (62, 168; see also Livre Blanc 2013, 40). If her thesis bears resemblance to the traditional concept of *Eurafrique*, so too does her reasoning. Guigou evokes the double-proximity—geographical and human (170)—that obliges the two regions to reinforce their mutual ties. Africa and Europe are said to complement each other in the realms of agriculture (62), economy (62-4), and—last but not least—demography (68; see also Aubry 2011).

François Hollande, like his predecessor, having promised a rupture with the colonial past, remains committed to the Eurafrican idea. For the president, the Mediterranean Sea is not a dividing but a unifying factor that imposes common and shared responsibilities on Europe and its southern neighbours (Hollande 2012a). On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the African Union in May 2013, Hollande proclaimed that he had come to Addis Abeba to speak of ‘Africa’s future, the future of the relation between France, Europe and Africa, that is, the future of the world’ (Hollande 2013i).<sup>254</sup> By equating the future of the French–African relationship with the future of the Euro-African relationship and by extension the future of the world, Hollande inferred from the close and ‘intimate’ relationship that

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<sup>252</sup> This speech, which was intended to advocate a new approach to the French-African relationship, ended up being an example of extremely bad communication. In front of a Senegalese audience, the President not only absolved colonialism of most of its sins, but also proclaimed that the ‘African Man’ has not engaged with his own history and continues to live according to the seasons of the year, which forecloses any possibility of progress (Sarkozy 2007).

<sup>253</sup> Similarities exist with an argument made earlier by Pierre Nord. Nord, author of *L'Eurafrique notre dernière chance* (1955), saw Europe as being caught between the US and the USSR.

<sup>254</sup> ‘*Mais aujourd’hui ma présence ici est pour évoquer l’avenir, l’avenir de l’Afrique, l’avenir de la relation entre la France, l’Europe et l’Afrique, et donc l’avenir du monde*’.

France had maintained with many African countries (Hollande 2013i) that also Europe is closely linked to Africa. This sort of extrapolation constituted a mental shortcut of the French foreign policy elite that influenced their threat perceptions and policy choices throughout the decision-making process.

At the European Council on 13-14 December 2012 Fabius and Le Drian urged their colleagues to take the Malian threat seriously and portrayed it as a critical juncture towards the establishment of a *Europe de la Défense*. They concluded their speeches by affirming that ‘in a strategic context that is characterised by the emergence of new threats, France is convinced that the European Union has to reinforce its contributions to international security in its neighbourhood and beyond. This conviction contributes to France’s European ambition’ (Le Drian and Fabius 2012a).<sup>255</sup> During all phases of the Malian crisis and the subsequent intervention, French politicians called upon Europe to take a more active position allowing for a quicker resolution of the conflict. French elites were convinced that their European partners needed to be mobilised, to provide military, humanitarian, and development assistance (Fabius 2013d, 4).

Given the great expectations on the part of French diplomats and the Élysée concerning a European approach to the crisis resolution, it is no surprise that French decision-makers became increasingly frustrated with Europe once they realised that they could not convince other member states of the seriousness of the situation in Mali (Marchal 2013a, 488). Notwithstanding the implementation of the 2007 EU Sahel Strategy, which French security experts considered the result of their successful lobbying,<sup>256</sup> the general impression that prevailed in Paris was that of a disinterested and largely absent Europe. Defence Minister Le Drian stated in front of Parliament, ‘We stand in front of the necessity of reviving *l’Europe de la Défense*, which today is at a standstill. Despite the diminution of America’s engagement in Europe, the risks—be it old risks or new risks—remain very high, in particular those coming from the Sahel. Unfortunately not all our partners share this point of view’ (Assemblée Nationale 2012a, 7).

While some authors explain Europe’s reluctance by blaming French elites’ arrogance and their failure

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<sup>255</sup> ‘Dans un contexte stratégique caractérisé par l’émergence de nouvelles menaces, la France est convaincue que l’Union européenne doit apporter une contribution renforcée à la sécurité internationale, dans son voisinage et au-delà. Cette conviction participe de l’ambition européenne de la France’.

<sup>256</sup> Xavier Collignon, vice-director of the DAS, interview by author, Paris, 6 August 2013.

‘to produce evidence they claimed to have about the threat Mali represented’ (Marchal 2013a, 491), French decision-makers hold the lack of a common European vision responsible for Europe’s disinterest. In particular, among the military the lack of a common strategic culture is understood as the principal factor preventing successful European military interventions.<sup>257</sup> Against this backdrop, French decision-makers soon arrived at the conclusion that the instability in Mali remains a French issue. As one of Le Drian’s policy advisors put it bluntly, ‘this is first of all a French issue. With the exception of Germany, Italy, Spain, and Belgium, go and try to get the rest of Europe interested in Africa, well good luck. The Poles do not give a toss; neither do the Scandinavians or the rest of Eastern Europe. They do not have the means or the desire’.<sup>258</sup> French actors were convinced that their European partners ignored the existing threat. ‘This zone is little-known by other Europeans. I was flabbergasted [when I assisted at a European Council meeting on terrorism two years ago]. We worked on the terrorist risk in Europe, but there was nothing about terrorism in the Sahel... They did not even realise what was happening in the Sahel, nor did they realise the objective threat that existed in this region’.<sup>259</sup> These complaints are directed against both European member states and the EU as a supranational institution. The parliamentary report on the security situation in the Sahel cited above affirms that it ‘is undeniable that the European Union, in contrast to some of its members like France, was slow to take concrete measures to fight against AQIM and to work on the recovery of the security in the Sahel’ (Assemblée Nationale 2012b, 75).<sup>260</sup>

In summary, French elites continued to stress the necessity of a common European approach to Africa’s security, but at the same time they were aware of its limits and remained sceptical with regard to the feasibility of a European solution in the near future. This scepticism played an important role during the decisional phase in early January, as shall be seen below. At the same time, the Hollande administration understood it as its task to keep France’s European partners interested in the Sahel region

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<sup>257</sup> Michel Goya, colonel, interview by author, Paris, 10 January 2014.

<sup>258</sup> Interview with a personal advisor to the Minister of Defence, Paris, 16 September 2013. ‘...c’est d’abord une question française. Allez intéresser le reste de l’Europe à l’exception de l’Allemagne, de l’Italie, de l’Espagne, de la Belgique en Afrique bon courage. Les Polonais s’en foutent, les Scandinaves s’en foutent, l’Europe de l’Est s’en fout et les autres n’ont pas les moyens ni l’envie’.

<sup>259</sup> Interview with a project officer at Francophonie organisation, Paris, 01 October 2013.

<sup>260</sup> ‘...il est indéniable que l’Union européenne, contrairement à quelques-uns de ses membres, comme la France, a tardé à prendre des mesures concrètes pour lutter contre AQMI et œuvrer au rétablissement de la sécurité dans le Sahel’.

and to help to advance the idea of *l'Europe de la Défense*. As Le Drian argued in summer 2012, 'First, we need to recreate the spirit. It does not exist anymore. Then, we need to think about the concrete implementation of a couple of specific points....We do not want some kind of abandonment. If we do not take the initiative, who else will?'<sup>261</sup> (Le Drian 2012a). However, Europe was not the only playing field where French decision-makers tried to promote a multilateral solution to the Malian crisis. From May to December 2012, the Hollande administration collaborated with Mali's neighbours, the African Union, ECOWAS, and France's traditional partners in the region to find an African solution to the crisis in Mali.

### ***Africanisation of Africa's Security***

From the beginning of its mandate, the Hollande administration campaigned for the deployment of an African peacekeeping operation to Mali. Drafted on France's initiative, UN resolutions 2056, 2071, and 2085 provided the legal framework for the deployment of a multilateral peacekeeping force coordinated by ECOWAS.<sup>262</sup> With the adoption of UN resolution 2085 the way for the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) seemed to be paved. The resolutions illustrate France's commitment to the doctrine of "African solutions to African security problems". Going beyond Western-led peacekeeping operations and strengthening regional defence capacities across Africa was one of the most prominent elements in the socialist government's foreign policy discourse.

The idea of establishing a regional intervention force was not new but dates back to the mid-1990s and the establishment of the RECAMP programme in 1997. As described in Chapter One, a gradual break with the colonial and post-colonial past happened during the 1990s. Arguably, France's involvement in the Rwandan genocide constituted the ultimate trigger that generated the conviction among French decision-makers that France should refrain from unilateral involvement in the region. It became imperative for the French political elite to avoid any sort of accusations that portray their country as a neo-colonial power. Thus, for both financial and legitimacy reasons, it had become inconceivable

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<sup>261</sup> *'Il faut d'abord recréer l'esprit, il n'existe plus. Puis établir les points concrets de mise en œuvre....Nous ne voulons pas d'une forme d'abandon. Si nous ne prenons pas les initiatives, qui le fera ?'*

<sup>262</sup> The three resolutions were sanctioned by the UN Security Council on 5 July (2056), 12 October (2071), and 20 December 2012 (2085) respectively.

that France would continue its unilateral interventions of the past to protect friendly regimes or to overthrow dictators that had fallen from favour with the French president. Under the label of *Architecture de Paix et de Sécurité en Afrique* (APSA, African Peace and Security Architecture), successive French governments promoted an African appropriation of the continent's security.<sup>263</sup>

Present French security policy towards Africa rests on the three pillars of multilateralism, regionalism, and African ownership (Charbonneau 2008a, 283), all three of which shaped the discourse on the crisis in Mali. In principle, all French military interventions abroad are embedded in the Western liberal tradition of interventionism and are usually conducted as multilateral operations. The 2008 White Book on Defence describes the institutionalisation of this multilateral approach acknowledging that 'with some exceptions, all our military operations are conducted within a multinational framework. This framework can take the form of an already existing coalition, as in the case of NATO and the European Union, or be *ad hoc* circumstantial coalition' (Livre Blanc 2008, 201).<sup>264</sup> According to the White Book, unilateral interventions are only considered as a possible option under three specific circumstances: when they serve the purpose of protecting French expatriates, when a binding bilateral defence agreement makes them necessary, or when they are launched in response to targeted actions against selected French interests (Livre Blanc 2008, 71–72).

Although the idea of African security ownership can be traced back to the mid-1990s, it fell on particularly fertile ground when it coincided with the socialist government's foreign policy discourse. During the electoral campaign, the Socialist Party embraced a human-rights oriented discourse vis-à-vis the African continent. Notably, Thomas Mélonio, the number two of the African desk at the Élysée, can be identified as being at the origin of this new discourse on Africa. In a pamphlet published by the Jean Jaurès Foundation, Mélonio (2011, 12) developed a 'leftist vision on Africa'.<sup>265</sup> He criticised France's past military interventionism in francophone African countries in the name of regime stability, called for the definitive annulment of all existing defence treaties with African countries, and advocated a reduction of France's military presence on the African continent, a transfer of responsibilities to the

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<sup>263</sup> Xavier Collignon, vice-director of the DAS, interview by author, Paris, 6 August 2013.

<sup>264</sup> 'Sauf exception, toutes nos opérations militaires se dérouleront dans un cadre multinational. Celui-ci peut être préétabli, dans le cas de l'Alliance Atlantique et de l'Union européenne, ou *ad hoc*, dans le cas de coalitions de circonstance'.

<sup>265</sup> '...une vision «de gauche» de l'Afrique'.

European level, and a more committed support to the creation of African defence capabilities (2011, 28–33). These guiding principles dominated the Hollande administration’s initial policy towards crisis management on the African continent. The idea was to carry the rupture with the colonial past beyond the spheres of political discourse and symbolic acts, and apply it to the day-to-day policy-making processes. On several occasions, the president affirmed France’s commitment to the military capacity building in Africa. In the traditional presidential keynote speech on Africa, François Hollande explained in front of the Senegalese National Assembly that the ‘future of Africa will rest on Africans’ increased capacity to handle the crises that the continent is going through by themselves’ (Hollande 2012i).<sup>266</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which as an institution is said to be less attached to the African continent than for instance the Ministry of Defence, soon became the principal mouthpiece and promoter of a regional intervention force. Between June and December 2012, Laurent Fabius repeatedly emphasised the necessity that France and the international community should support the capacity-building of African armies. The foreign minister stressed that the security crisis in Mali ‘is an African problem, and there the solution needs to be first and foremost African’ (Valero 2012). In September 2012, the minister’s spokesperson declared that ‘this is an African operation, which other states, such as France, are ready to support. But the minister made it clear that there won’t be any French forces on the ground’ (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2012d).<sup>267</sup> On 5 December 2012, Hollande confirmed this view again when commenting on the future military operation in Mali, which will ‘not only be decided but also executed by them [the Africans]’ (Hollande 2012e).<sup>268</sup>

The primary intention behind this allegedly new approach to African security, which should be showcased during the crisis resolution in Mali, was to avoid accusations of neo-colonial interference in African matters. As Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius underlined when questioned on France’s contribution toward the international intervention force, ‘France is not going to substitute the Africans since this idea of the French intervening against the Malians would be perceived as extremely hard

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<sup>266</sup> *‘Le futur de l’Afrique se bâtira par le renforcement de la capacité des Africains à gérer eux-mêmes les crises que le continent traverse’.*

<sup>267</sup> *‘C’est une opération africaine que d’autres États, dont la France, sont prêts à soutenir. Mais le ministre a dit clairement qu’il n’y aurait pas de forces françaises sur le terrain’.*

<sup>268</sup> *‘Elle sera non seulement décidée par eux mais exécutée par eux’.*



(dure)—that would make no sense at all’ (Fabius 2012e).<sup>269</sup> Elsewhere, President Hollande made it clear that France’s non-interventionist stance in the Malian case was not an expression of disinterest or indifference but the attempt to break with the inglorious unilateral interventionism of the past.

France is directly concerned [by the Malian crisis], but not in the ways known from the past... in any case, we have to act, not by responding with yesterday’s interventions—these times are over—our role consists of supporting the Africans. It is them who need to take the initiative, the decision, the responsibility... Our mission when the time comes will be to support their action within the United Nations and the Security Council (Hollande 2012j).<sup>270</sup>

The Africanisation discourse excluded the possibility of direct French involvement.<sup>271</sup> Instead, France could take on the role of a *facilitateur* (facilitator) who shepherds the problem’s solution from the distance (Fabius 2012g). The Hollande administration insisted on that point.<sup>272</sup> All official statements until early January 2013 confirmed that the deployment of French troops was out of the question. Even on 10 January, one day before the presidential decision to launch Operation Serval, the foreign minister’s spokesperson declared that ‘the recent developments underline once more the necessity to quickly proceed with the deployment of an African intervention force in Mali and a European training and advisory mission’ (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2013c).<sup>273</sup> However, one has to remain somewhat critical concerning these affirmations. While many actors in the French state apparatus notably in the Élysée and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wished to exclude France’s military participation, the possibility of an air support mission was envisaged among the viable options from October 2012 onwards, without, however, ever having been announced publicly.<sup>274</sup>

The quest for legitimacy and the conviction that an autonomous African peacekeeping facility would

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<sup>269</sup> *‘Mais la France ne va pas se substituer aux Africains parce que ce serait une idée qui serait reçue de manière extrêmement dure si des Français intervenaient contre des Maliens - cela n’aurait aucun sens’.*

<sup>270</sup> *‘La France est directement concernée, non pas dans les formes que nous avons pu connaître, mais en tout cas, nous aurons à agir, non pas par les interventions d’hier - ce temps-là est révolu - notre rôle consiste à appuyer nos partenaires africains ; ce sont eux qui doivent prendre l’initiative, la décision, la responsabilité, et les organisations régionales, dans les actions qu’ils souhaitent mener. Mais notre mission sera à ce moment-là d’appuyer leur action dans le cadre des Nations unies et de ce que décidera le Conseil de sécurité’.*

<sup>271</sup> The phrase “France is not going to intervene unilaterally” is the most frequently coded node that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the data.

<sup>272</sup> References to France as a facilitator are among the ten most frequently coded concepts that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the discursive material.

<sup>273</sup> *‘Ces derniers événements soulignent une nouvelle fois la nécessité de procéder au déploiement rapide d’une force africaine au Mali ainsi que de la mission européenne de formation et de conseil’.*

<sup>274</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014. *‘Mais très tôt – je dirais en octobre – on avait sur la table l’option, que quand l’opération africaine sera prête, on offrirait nous une contribution sous la forme d’un soutien aérien. Donc on est déjà dans une intervention française, même si ce n’est pas une intervention au sol’.*

benefit both Africa and France explains the French commitment to an African solution. In practice, however, few actors in Paris believed in a speedy realisation of autonomous African peacekeeping capacities (Notin 2014, 76). In particular, the French military remained doubtful with respect to the feasibility and effectiveness of a completely autonomous African security architecture. As Jean Fleury, former chief of staff of the Air Force, put it: ‘It [France] wishes to entrust the Africans with the problem solution. However, it cannot but know that most of the propositions it advances are completely unrealistic’ (Fleury 2013, 11).<sup>275</sup>

### 4.2.3 The Decision to Intervene

In the evening of 11 January 2013, François Hollande met the press and announced that the French Army had launched a military operation to fight together with Malian forces against those terrorist groups that threatened the existence of the Malian state, the security of its population, and the lives of 6,000 French expatriates (Hollande 2013f). This was the beginning of Operation Serval, which at its height engaged around 6,000 French soldiers, making it the largest French military intervention since the Algerian War in 1954–1962.<sup>276</sup>

The decision came as a reaction to an earlier offensive by rebel forces. In an attempt to extend their traditional stronghold that until then was limited to the northern regions of the country, AQIM, MUJAO, and Anṣār ad-Dīn fighters were directing themselves towards the south.<sup>277</sup> By 10 January, they had captured the town of Konna (600km northeast of Bamako), ‘the last buffer between the rebels and Mopti ... , which is the main town in the region and is seen as the gateway to the country's north’ (Diallo 2013).

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<sup>275</sup> *‘Elle souhaite confier la solution du problème aux pays africains. Elle ne peut cependant que savoir que la plupart des propositions qu’elle avance sont totalement irréalistes’*. Several interviewees confirmed this point, arguing that everyone is aware of the limits that surround the idea of African peacekeeping capabilities. Interview with civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 5 February 2014.

<sup>276</sup> The number comprises both the ground soldiers and those participating from France. Five thousand soldiers were deployed in Mali. As Colonel Gèze, commander of the 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Marine Platoon explains, ‘Within one month the equivalent number of troops and equipment of the ten-year presence in Afghanistan had been shipped to Bamako’ (quoted in Notin 2014, 221).

<sup>277</sup> The exact reasons for this offensive remain unclear. Some argue that it was a preventive measure in light of the upcoming deployment of a UN backed African-led peacekeeping force others contend that the rebels simply underestimated France’s determination to intervene.

In reaction to these developments, France's permanent representative at the UN requested a closed-door meeting of the Security Council on 10 January. On 11 January, François Hollande reunited the restricted Defence Council at the end of which he decided to respond to the request issued by Mali's interim president and to deploy French troops in a veritable counter-offensive that aimed at eradicating as many terrorist fighters as possible.<sup>278</sup>

After a first phase that lasted until the end of January and during which the French Army stopped the rebel columns and recaptured Timbuktu, Gao, and Konna, the French president paid his first state visit to Mali. On 2 February, Hollande, surrounded by crowds of rejoicing Malians, announced that 'terrorism has been repelled, hunted, but not yet been defeated' (Hollande 2013g).<sup>279</sup> At that time, the military operation entered its second phase, which aimed at maintaining the pressure against the remaining insurgent fighters, stabilising the northern part, in particular the Kidal region, creating the conditions for democratic elections in July 2013, and preparing the terrain for the African-led international peacekeeping operation. At the time of writing, the ongoing operation had claimed the lives of several hundreds of insurgent fighters and nine French soldiers. It saved the Malian state from collapse and allowed presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in July 2013. It is also said to have positively contributed to regional stability and is considered an asset in the global war on terror. Operation Serval prepared the terrain for the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) contingent, which replaced the AFISMA in July 2013 and until July 2014 had led to the deployment of 8,000 UN peacekeepers. At the same time, the Malian Army, with the assistance of the EUTM, was able to train and deploy 7,000 soldiers (Ministère de la Défense et des Anciens Combattants 2014). In July 2014, Operation Serval still comprised 1,600 French soldiers who were engaged in regular counterinsurgency missions.

Most of these elements point to a rather successful military operation, which *a posteriori* gives reason to Hollande's decision. However, during the very moment of taking action, nothing was less certain than the outcome of Operation Serval. As Notin points out, 'at the moment when they had to make a decision, the French authorities had no tangible element at their disposal except for some distraught reports by

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<sup>278</sup> Interview with civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 5 February 2014.

<sup>279</sup> '...le terrorisme a été repoussé, il a été chassé mais il n'a pas encore été vaincu'.

the Malian Army’ (Notin 2014, 152–53). For this close observer of French foreign interventions, ‘Serval was exceptional in many regards, and its launch was particularly remarkable. France was about to launch its most significant military operation since the Algerian War based not on evidence but an array of presumptions’ (2014, 153). Afghanistan analogies were, as we saw above, continually present during the policy framing process. Thus, French decision-makers knew of the risks involved when engaging in warfare with transnational non-state actors. Therefore it is no surprise that most of the civil and military advisors in the Ministry of Defence were not particularly optimistic regarding a quick end to the mission.<sup>280</sup> Notwithstanding the considerable degree of uncertainty, the high risk of military action, and a discourse that hitherto excluded any French troop involvement, François Hollande ordered the intervention. Against this backdrop, the last section of this chapter concentrates on the moment of the taking of action, that is, the French decision to resolve the crisis in Mali with military means. Given the fact that until early January the Hollande administration had consistently denied the possibility of a unilateral French strike, the subsequent intervention thus seriously challenges ideational arguments and discursive approaches. In particular, the analysis of public discourse could be discarded as a wild-goose chase. To maintain the ideationalist approach advanced here, one needs to question if—in light of this fundamental change—cognitive maps can still be said to have had an impact on the decision to intervene.

### *Elements of Justification*

After having announced his decision on 11 January 2013, François Hollande commissioned Foreign Minister Fabius to expose the motivations behind the French intervention. Fabius initiated his statement by revoking the potential threat to Europe, designating the enemy as ‘groups of terrorists and criminals’, and referring to UN Resolution 2085 on the deployment of an international peacekeeping force.<sup>281</sup> He thus put the justification for intervention in line with those elements that had dominated the official

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<sup>280</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 27 January 2014.

<sup>281</sup> It is worthy to note that in contrast to UN Resolution 2085, which authorises the deployment of an AFISMA or *Mission Internationale de Soutien au Mali sous conduite africaine* (MISMA) in French, Fabius refers to an International Support Mission to Mali (*mission internationale de soutien au Mali*), dropping the crucial qualifier ‘African-led’. In the remainder of the declaration, Fabius refers to UN Resolutions 2056, 2071, and 2085 as providing—in conjunction with article 51 of the UN Charter and the request by the Malian authorities—the legal framework for France’s intervention. However, none of these three resolutions evokes a French-led intervention force.

discourse until 10 January 2013. After this introduction, an explanation of why the president took the risk of a unilateral intervention followed.

However, for the last couple of days the situation has severely deteriorated, and the terrorist groups of the north—taking advantage of the delay between the moment of making international decisions and their application—have decided to go down to the south. All evidence suggests that their aim is to control the whole of Mali in order to put a terrorist state in place. Therefore, the Malian authorities addressed both the UN Security Council and France to ask for urgent intervention. The Security Council met yesterday and estimated in a declaration, which was passed by unanimity, that the threat is extremely serious and that action is needed. The Security Council was seized by the Malian authorities. France also received a request for air and ground support. In light of this emergency situation and in accordance with international law, the president of the republic, head of state, chief of the armies, took the decision to positively respond to the request by the Malian state and the international community.<sup>282</sup> (Fabius 2013i)

The foreign minister stressed the fact that the president's decision was a mere reaction to a changing situation on the ground, not a shift in France's underlying policy. Indeed, the goals advocated in the official discourse remained largely the same before and after 11 January 2013. However, the means to achieve the desired goals had been altered. In early October 2012, the French representative at the UN argued, 'we see a sanctuary for terrorist groups emerging in Mali, which subsequently can destabilise the whole of Africa. Thus, we need to act. We cannot wait any longer. But of course, it is up to the Malians to act, it is up to the Africans to act, and the Security Council must support them' (Araud 2012c).<sup>283</sup> French policy-makers already at this earlier point in time vociferously advocated the need of a military strike. Simultaneously, the president affirmed his determination to fight terrorism in the Sahel. In an interview with France 24 he explained that, 'by leaving AQIM, that is Al Qaeda, to prosper in the Sahel, I put my country in jeopardy because terrorism [*le terrorisme*] can come from there...I can't accept this. We need to cut off the terrorists' route. Therefore, an international policy is needed. This is

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<sup>282</sup> *'Mais depuis quelques jours, la situation s'est malheureusement détériorée très gravement et profitant du délai entre les décisions internationales prises et le moment de leur application, les groupes terroristes et criminels du nord Mali ont décidé de descendre vers le sud. Leur objectif est selon toute évidence, de contrôler la totalité du Mali pour y installer un État terroriste. C'est la raison pour laquelle les autorités maliennes ont saisi à la fois le Conseil de sécurité des Nations Unies et la France pour leur demander d'intervenir en urgence. Le Conseil de sécurité s'est réuni hier et dans une déclaration qu'il a adoptée à l'unanimité, a estimé que la menace était extrêmement grave et qu'il fallait réagir. Il a été saisi par les autorités maliennes. La France a été saisie également d'une demande d'appui aérien et d'appui militaire. Compte tenu de cette situation d'urgence et en s'appuyant sur la légalité internationale, le Président de la République, chef de l'État, chef des armées, a pris la décision de répondre positivement à la demande du Mali et à la demande de la communauté internationale.'*

<sup>283</sup> *'Nous voyons apparaître au Mali un refuge pour les groupes terroristes qui peuvent ensuite menacer de déstabiliser l'ensemble de l'Afrique. Donc nous devons agir, nous ne pouvons plus attendre. Mais naturellement c'est aux Maliens d'agir, c'est aux Africains d'agir et le Conseil de sécurité doit les soutenir.'*

what I want to do in Mali' (Hollande 2012m).<sup>284</sup> As demonstrated above, the securitisation of the Malian crisis and the emphasis put on a military solution dates back to the second half of 2012. The difference between the preceding statements and Hollande's decision to intervene lies in the policy-makers' willingness to contribute to this mission in a way that exceeded all prior commitments.

In contrast to the previously employed notions of 'presence and activities of terrorists', Fabius framed the threat in terms of the creation of a 'terrorist state'. The use of the term 'terrorist state' suggests that the crisis reached a new level of intensity, calling for immediate action. By consequence, the decision was presented less as a choice than as a necessity. Acknowledging the serious character of Hollande's decision, Fabius argued that 'the changing situation made this [intervention] necessary: we need to stop the breakthrough of the terrorists, or else Mali will fall in their hands, constituting a threat for the whole of Africa and Europe' (Fabius 2013i).<sup>285</sup> Once again, the necessity of intervention was linked to the expected consequences a collapse of the Malian state would have on Europe. In addition, French decision-makers also highlighted the suddenness of the rebels' offensive.

Suddenly, the terrorist armed groups launched an offensive. They have taken the city of Konna. At this moment, our assessment was that they were totally able to take Bamako. So we decided that the existence of the state of Mali and, beyond Mali, the stability of all West Africa were at stake. With determination but also with reluctance we decided that we had no other choice but to launch this military intervention. We will conduct it as long as it will be necessary. (Araud 2013b)

The changes in the operational environment together with the decision-makers' perception of a serious and immanent threat created the conviction of a necessary and unavoidable intervention. The official discourse emphasised the fact that the president was constrained to make a decision within a few hours (Fabius 2013k). This argument should be taken with a grain of salt. A military operation of the scale of Serval requires intensive preparation. Operational plans dated back months if not years and phone conversations between Dioncounda Traoré and François Hollande evoking a unilateral strike by

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<sup>284</sup> *'C'est en laissant AQMI, c'est-à-dire Al Qaïda, prospérer dans le Sahel, que je ferai courir un risque à mon pays parce que le terrorisme peut venir de là. Nous avons même appris qu'il y avait eu des ressortissants français au Mali, comme il y en a en Somalie, comme nous pouvons en trouver en Syrie, et qui ensuite peuvent revenir dans leur pays avec des visées terroristes. Je ne peux pas l'accepter. Il faut donc couper la route des terroristes. Il faut donc avoir une politique internationale. C'est ce que je veux faire au Mali'.*

<sup>285</sup> *'C'est une décision grave mais qui est absolument nécessitée par la situation : il faut stopper la percée des terroristes, sinon c'est le Mali tout entier qui tombe dans leurs mains avec une menace pour toute l'Afrique et pour l'Europe elle-même'.*

the French Army took place from 7 January onwards.<sup>286</sup> However, reducing the moment of the “making of action” to such a short period of time helped create the impression that a unilateral operation had not been a viable option until the very day on which it was decided.<sup>287</sup> This is important in order not to discredit the preceding discourse. By stressing the ad hoc nature of the decision, the military intervention could be framed not as a rupture, but as a continuation of the previous discourses and practices. The message was conveyed that if it were not for the rebels’ changing tactics France would not have intervened. Notin (2014, 177) in his analysis of the military aspects of Operation Serval finds further proof at the operational level for the urgency having been rather political than military.

At the same time, French decision-makers invested considerable effort and time in presenting the mission as an international intervention that enjoyed a three-fold legitimacy.

I would like to underline that this intervention conforms to the strict framework set up by international law. The intervention is a reaction to a *formal request by the Malian president*. It is conducted in *compliance with the UN Charter*, and is *consistent with UN resolutions 2056, 2071, and 2085*. The United Nations provide the framework, Mali requested the mission, the Africans and the International Community are our partners. Of course, we do not have any desire of acting alone. The international political support—I insist on that point—is almost unanimous. Our actions were transparent and we informed all our partners. Yesterday, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called me on the phone to confirm—and I quote—that we have the United Nations’ full support.<sup>288</sup> (Fabius 2013j, emphasis added)

To make the intervention compatible with international law, the French discourse referred to the formal request by the Malian interim president, the UN Charter and the support of the international

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<sup>286</sup> Romain Nadal, former spokesperson of François Hollande, interview by author, Paris, 7 October 2013. Others argue that the decision had already been taken 10 days before its announcement; Cyrille Le Déaut, policy advisor at the French embassy, interview by author, Paris, 30 August 2013. According to Keenan (2013, 274–75) French and US forces were preparing the ground for a possible intervention since June 2012. He explicitly refers to French and US forces being deployed to Niger ‘to help with intelligence and logistical support in the event of a military intervention into Mali’ (Keenan 2013, 275).

<sup>287</sup> The official version reads that Hollande took the decision to intervene on 11 January 2013. A couple of hours later, the first soldiers engaged in combats with Islamist fighters. Inevitably, the military had prepared this strike in advance or else they wouldn’t have been able to react in such a short time frame (Lasserre and Oberlé 2013). Interestingly, François Hollande stated during his state visit to Mali in February that he had taken the decision already on 10 January (Hollande 2013g).

<sup>288</sup> ‘*Cette intervention, je veux le souligner, s’inscrit dans le cadre strict de la légalité internationale. Elle répond à une demande formelle du président malien et elle est conduite en conformité avec la charte des Nations unies, en cohérence avec les résolutions des Nations unies 2056, 2071 et 2085. Le cadre, c’est donc l’organisation des Nations unies ; le demandeur, c’est le Mali ; nos partenaires, ce sont les Africains et la Communauté internationale. Nous n’avons évidemment pas vocation à agir seuls. Le soutien politique international dont nous disposons – je voudrais insister là-dessus – est quasi-unanime. Nous avons agi en toute transparence, nous avons informé l’ensemble de nos partenaires. Hier, le Secrétaire général des Nations unies, M. Ban Ki-Moon, a tenu à m’appeler au téléphone longuement pour me confirmer – je le cite – que nous avons le plein soutien de l’organisation des Nations unies.*’

community, and the three resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council on the situation in Mali throughout the second half of 2012. At the outset of the intervention, references to resolutions 2056, 2071, 2085 and their unanimous approval dominated the French explanations. More than providing a legal base in a strict sense, they served to assure the necessary political support. Although Operation Serval resembled more France's past military interventions in support of friendly regimes than a multilateral peacekeeping operation, actors framed it as an intervention that France conducted in the name of the international community and Europe for the sake of Mali and the West African region.<sup>289</sup>

I think everyone was happy that France intervened. The United States were unable to intervene. Of course, they have considerable means at their disposition, but they would have had to deploy a good number of resources to intervene in Mali. The fact that France did the job almost alone—well... apart from the little help it received from the United States and the United Kingdom, which provided some tanker aircraft—suited the United States. The fact that France did the work almost alone suited everyone. I think this suited indeed everyone, and as a result it provided us with huge political support. ...the world understood why France intervened. We did not intervene for ourselves, we did not intervene to defend any French interests. We actually intervened to save a country from collapse.<sup>290</sup>

Next to the legitimacy this argument seeks to create, it also reflects the way French actors perceive their role in the international system. As representatives of an influential middle power, French actors are convinced that their actions must be greater than the mere maximisation of interests. France's actions beyond its borders must aim at uniting French interests with a larger common good, be it of the international community, Europe, or Africa.

By the end of January 2013, references to UN resolution 2085 disappeared almost completely from the French discourse. This discursive shift can be explained by the discrepancies between the wording of UN resolution 2085 and France's subsequent action. Actually, the resolution did not foresee the deployment of French troops but only evoked the establishment of the AFISMA. Instead of further

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<sup>289</sup> Isabelle Lasserre, journalist at Le Monde, interview by author, Paris, 23 August 2013.

<sup>290</sup> Romain Nadal, former spokesperson of François Hollande, interview by author, Paris, 7 October 2013. *'Je pense que tout le monde était content que la France intervienne. Les Etats-Unis n'étaient pas en mesure d'intervenir. Ils ont bien sûr des moyens considérables, mais il aurait fallu qu'ils déploient un nombre de moyens pour intervenir au Mali. Le fait que la France fasse le job quasiment seule, enfin elle a eu un peu d'aide, elle a eu l'aide des Etats-Unis, le Royaume Uni a apporté des avions ravitailleurs, mais le fait que la France a fait très largement le travail seule, ça arrange les Etats-Unis. Ça arrangeait tout le monde. Je pense que ça arrangeait tout le monde, et du coup ça nous apportait un soutien politique très large. Je n'ai pas vu beaucoup de déclarations hostiles à l'intervention au Mali. Il y en a eu quelques-unes, y compris en France du parti de Front National, etc., mais globalement tout le monde a compris pourquoi on est intervenu. On n'est pas intervenu pour nous, on n'est pas intervenu pour défendre des intérêts français. On est vraiment intervenu pour sauver un pays du K.O.'*



insisting on the text of UN resolution 2085, justifications accentuated the request for assistance issued by Dioncounda Traoré.<sup>291</sup> Although these were the most frequently advanced explanations of the French decision, in particular throughout the month of January 2013, they only touch the surface of the complex web of motivations that provoked the decision to intervene. In other words, they lay out the conditions that allowed France to intervene in this specific situation. They do not explain why the French president, together with his ministers and advisors, seized the opportunity and took a considerable moral and political risk when approving the military operation. To understand the French decision, one also needs to examine why alternatives were discarded and what elements pushed French actors towards intervention.

### *The Reluctance of Europe and Africa*

Over and again, and in particular during the early phase of the intervention, French policy-makers referred to Operation Serval as a decision that was taken with great reluctance and only out of absolute necessity. More than being a mere justification, this reluctance to intervene was the expression of a veritable conviction. The claim that France is not going to intervene unilaterally had been repeated on so many occasions that the arguments' advocates treated it as a truism: France did not want to intervene in Mali; it had to! As shown above, in particular the president's advisors at the Élysée and Laurent Fabius and his staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had internalised the doctrine of a non-intervention to an extent that made it difficult to abandon this idea. Thus, in order to change France's position, it necessitated a counter-narrative that was strong enough to overcome the persistent reluctance. This counter-narrative emerged first in the form of the realisation that all multilateral efforts failed to address the problem.

As shown above, from September to December 2012 the French government advocated a European and African problem solution to the crisis in Mali. *L'Europe de la Défense* is understood as a collective

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<sup>291</sup> Dioncounda Traoré first contacted the president on 7 January. Over the course of the coming days, the two presidents were in permanent contact to exchange on the developments on the ground. This limits the very "moment of the making of action" to three days (Romain Nadal, former spokesperson for François Hollande, interview by author, Paris, 7 October 2013).

defence community that assures both Europe's internal security and is able to intervene abroad. In particular in light of the emergence of new threats French actors were convinced, as Le Drian and Fabius pointed out, 'that the European Union needs to reinforce its contribution to international security, both in its neighbourhood and beyond' (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2012a).<sup>292</sup> In line with this conviction, the president, the foreign minister, and the defence minister first campaigned for a European intervention force and then for a European training mission in Mali. However, the reluctance of most Europeans to answer France's calls reinforced the sentiment that over the short- and medium-term a coherent, comprehensive, and efficient European approach to Africa's security would not be feasible. The more the crisis in Mali intensified without provoking a visible reaction on the part of other EU member states, the more French decision-makers fell back to the conviction that 'Europe at the military level is inexistent'. While genuinely willing to share the responsibility of solving the Malian crisis with their European partners, French actors regretted the lack of responsiveness from the rest of Europe. As one policy advisor put it, 'Europe is a reluctant empire. It is not an empire that aspires to expand. It does not want to intervene. France would prefer the hat be European rather than French'.<sup>293</sup> Adding to this, French elites consider the rest of Europe to be rather inward looking, a characteristic that prevents Europe from establishing veritable military capacities comparable to those French actors find at their own national level.<sup>294</sup>

Over the course of the second half of 2012, French politicians became increasingly critical vis-à-vis Europe.<sup>295</sup> For instance, conservative MP Pierre Lellouche described Europe's involvement in Mali and the CAR as ridiculous: 'One needs to recall that, in theory, Europe counts 1.5 million soldiers in arms. If you send 200 instructors to Mali, and 500 soldiers, who are not going to wage war, to Central Africa, this is ridiculous. This is as if one would assume that the problem concerns only France and not the

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<sup>292</sup> 'Dans un contexte stratégique caractérisé par l'émergence de nouvelles menaces, la France est convaincue que l'Union européenne doit apporter une contribution renforcée à la sécurité internationale, dans son voisinage et au-delà'.

<sup>293</sup> Cyrille Le Déaut, policy advisor at the French embassy, interview by author, Paris, 30 August 2013. 'L'Europe sur le plan militaire elles inexistante. La France, comme d'ailleurs l'Angleterre, aimerait que l'Europe intervienne militairement. Le problème est surtout le blocage allemand. On n'arrive pas à créer l'Europe de la défense. L'Europe c'est un Empire réticent. Ce n'est pas un Empire qui se veut étendre. Il ne veut pas intervenir. La France préférerait que la casquette serait européenne, plutôt que française'.

<sup>294</sup> Project officer Francophonie Organisation, interview by author, Paris, 01 October 2013.

<sup>295</sup> Criticism against other European states was mostly limited to domestic political debates in Parliament. The minutes of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committees of the National Assembly are an insightful starting point for tracing this critical debate.

whole of Europe’.<sup>296</sup> While not all actors were equally harsh towards Europe, most shared the conviction that for the rest of Europe, the crisis in Mali was a French affair.<sup>297</sup> Vice-versa, Europe’s reluctance reinforced the traditional sentiment among French elites that ‘Africa is not a European issue, [but] first and foremost a French issue’.<sup>298</sup>

The biggest obstacle between the status quo and the envisaged *Europe de la Défense*—according to officials in Paris—is the lack of a common strategic culture and common vision of Europe’s security. Due to their respective histories, the different European member states have developed diverging security orientations and strategic interests, which are difficult to combine and are at times entirely incompatible.<sup>299</sup>

I am extremely sceptical. The problem is that we have visions and strategic cultures that are too different to come to an agreement on a common policy. What we see emerge are regional blocs, which are essentially economic. We can see a merger between the Dutch, the Belgian, the Central European, and German armies. To some extent, we [the French] share a common vision with the British. Consequently, we try to come closer to them, which is still a bit complicated. We are far away from a common defence [*Europe de la Défense*]. We had 44,000 soldiers in Afghanistan and we were incapable of sharing a common vision. The same is true for Libya. The EU was nowhere. We are far away from a European cohesion. We need a strategic vision that is more or less identical. And then, we also need the same vision with regard to the use of force. I am very sceptical of the idea of a European coherence.<sup>300</sup>

Acknowledging the lack of a shared European strategic culture, Jean-Yves Le Drian in his efforts to advance the European defence project gave priority to the creation of a ‘common European spirit’. Only after having created a common strategic culture, according to the minister, one can think of

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<sup>296</sup> Pierre Lellouche, MP, interview by author, Paris, 7 February 2014. ‘*Il faut rappeler que l’Union Européenne c’est 1,5 million de soldats théoriquement sous les armes. Quand vous avez 200 instructeurs au Mali, et 500 soldats qui ne vont pas faire la guerre d’ailleurs en Centre-Afrique, c’est ridicule. C’est comme si on considère que ce problème concerne la France et non pas toute l’Europe*’.

<sup>297</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 16 September 2013.

<sup>298</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 16 September 2013. ‘*Pour les élites française aujourd’hui l’Afrique ce n’est pas une question européenne. C’est d’abord une question française. Ça ne se partage pas ce genre de chose*’.

<sup>299</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 16 September 2013.

<sup>300</sup> Michel Goya, colonel, interview by author, Paris, 10 January 2014. ‘*Je suis extrêmement sceptique. Le problème c’est qu’on a des visions, des cultures stratégiques tellement différentes, qu’on ne se peut pas mettre d’accord sur une politique. Ce qu’on voit apparaître ce sont des blocs régionaux essentiellement économiques. On voit une fusion entre l’armée des Pays-Bas et l’armée allemande, belges, néerlandais, allemands, en Europe Centrale aussi. Nous, on a un peu la même vision que les Britanniques, donc on essaie de se rapprocher un peu des Britanniques, même si c’est toujours un peu compliqué. On est très loin de l’Europe de la Défense. On a eu 44.000 soldats en Afghanistan, on était incapable d’avoir une vision commune. Pareil en Libye, l’UE n’était nulle part. On est très loin d’avoir une cohésion européenne. Il faut avoir une vision stratégique à peu près identique, et puis il faut avoir une vision d’emploi des forces un peu identique. Je suis très sceptique sur l’idée d’une cohérence européenne*’.

Europeanising specific tasks and pooling the different national military capacities (Le Drian 2012a). However, this process necessitated time (Le Drian and Fabius 2012b) and the reluctance of other member states to get involved in the crisis resolution confirmed French actors in their conviction that ‘Europe is not an instrument that allows for rapid interventions or for interventions in highly deteriorated situations necessitating high-risk military operations’. While unsuited for rapid and high-risk operations, officials still considered Europe a useful asset when it came to softer operations such as training and peacekeeping or policing missions.<sup>301</sup> Accordingly, the defence minister has from September 2012 onwards pushed its European partners to advance the creation of the EUTM, a training mission that does not involve any combat operations. Although the minister held onto the idea that ‘the crisis in the Sahara [would be] a good opportunity for a European intervention, both military and civilian, in order to assist in consolidating the rule of law and to restore a functioning judiciary while, at the same time, assuring military support’ (Assemblée Nationale 2012a),<sup>302</sup> he became increasingly aware of the fruitlessness of his attempts to convince his European counterparts. The military reinforced this perception by pointing towards the operational limits of a potential European intervention force. Given their expertise in the region, the Army remains an actor politicians listen to.

French actors came to a similarly sober conclusion regarding the African peacekeeping force that after procedural delays and political disagreements among the ECOWAS members was not expected to become operational before September 2013. Some authors cite ECOWAS’s and AU’s lack of political will and financial resources among the principal motives for French intervention (Marchal 2013a, 488; Weiss and Welz 2014, 897). In light of these delays and the limited offensive capacities of the AFISMA, French actors’, led once again by the military, became increasingly convinced that the African forces did not have the military clout to conduct an intervention alone. The military were the first to observe the infeasibility of an African-led counterstrike in case of a larger offensive by the rebels. Vice Chief of Staff Didier Castres explains that the members of the restricted Defence Council evaluated the capacity

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<sup>301</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014. *‘Ça dépend. Je crois que cette opération de formation de l’armée malienne, elle marche très bien...la leçon que j’en tire c’est que la défense européen n’est pas un outil qui permet d’intervenir rapidement, et ce n’est pas un outil qui permet d’intervenir dans des situations très dégradées, dans le spectre élevé de l’opération militaire’.*

<sup>302</sup> *‘La crise au Sahel serait une bonne opportunité pour une intervention européenne, à la fois militaire et civile, pour aider à consolider l’État de droit et restaurer une justice qui fonctionne, tout en assurant la sécurité par un accompagnement militaire’.*

of an African force to stop the offensive during their first meetings. They concluded that these forces simply were not ready. In contrast, the French Army had developed detailed plans for a possible intervention since 2009. By January 2013, the military possessed a precise understanding of the force that was needed to counter the rebels' offensive. With regard to the operational level, the intervention was thus not perceived as a drastic change of the underlying policy, but simply as a reshuffle of the order in which things were going to happen.<sup>303</sup> One pundit defined Serval as 'the acknowledgement that we [the French] cannot outsource—I dare to say—Africa's security entirely to the United Nations, the African organisations, and the regional organisations'. According to the same analyst, 'these three actors very often demand the presence of a modern and efficient third-party Army, which happens to be the French Army'.<sup>304</sup>

Operation Serval was never considered as being contradictory to the Africanisation discourse, but rather as complimentary to it. From the outset any kind of military operation, be it multilateral or unilateral, was portrayed not 'as a [foreign] military intervention, but as the return of the Malian Army' (Araud 2012a).<sup>305</sup> On day two of the French military campaign, the president specified the intentions behind the operation as follows, 'Let me remind you that France does not pursue any specific interest other than saving a friendly country [*pays ami*] and fighting against terrorism. This is why its action is supported by the entire international community and greeted by all African countries' (Hollande 2013e).<sup>306</sup> French decision-makers considered the support by the international community and Africa as sufficient criteria to distinguish Operation Serval from past interventions. As of 17 January, the first African troops arrived in Mali, reinforcing the view that French troops were acting only in support of the African peacekeeping force.

In order to bring their actions in line with the Europeanisation and Africanisation discourses, it was crucial for French actors to win the support of the Security Council and even more the approval of the

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<sup>303</sup> Didier Castres, vice chief of staff, interview by author, Paris, 18 February 2014.

<sup>304</sup> Camille Grand, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, interview by author, Paris, 23 July 2013.

'... il y a la reconnaissance, qu'on ne peut pas entièrement sous-traiter, si j'ose dire, la sécurité africaine aux Nations Unies, aux organisations africaines, aux organisations régionales. Que ces trois acteurs sont très souvent demandeur d'une présence tiers d'une armée moderne, efficace etc. qui se trouve être l'armée française'.

<sup>305</sup> 'Ce n'est pas une intervention militaire, c'est le retour de l'armée malienne'.

<sup>306</sup> 'Je rappelle que la France dans cette opération ne poursuit aucun intérêt particulier autre que la sauvegarde d'un pays ami et n'a pas d'autre but que la lutte contre le terrorisme. C'est pourquoi son action est soutenue par l'ensemble de la Communauté internationale et saluée par tous les pays africains'.

African Union, the concerned regional organisations, and national governments. Asked about the difference between the operations in Mali and Central Africa and those in Côte d'Ivoire and Libya, a presidential advisor replied:

These interventions are of a very different nature. In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, half of Africa was against the operation. South Africa was against the operation. The African Union was divided. In the case of Libya, the African Union was against the operation. This is where the difference lies. The two operations in Mali and CAR would not have been realised if Africa had been against us. In both cases (Mali and CAR) Africa was for us and with us.<sup>307</sup>

As this statement shows, decision-makers' understanding of France's new security approach in Africa eventually did not exclude military interventionism per se, but only avoided any sort of involvement that would have created the impression that France was acting against African interests. Once having secured the support of the African Union and ECOWAS, a unilateral intervention, in preparation of a longer-term African troop deployment, became a possible solution to the crisis.

There is the principle [no French intervention], but then there is the practice. In practice the African standby force did not exist. The only forces that were implemented were ad hoc forces. These forces do not have sufficient operational power to counter an offensive such as the one in Konna. This [the French decision] is insofar not contradictory since the Africans are there, they play an important role, but they do not meet the criteria to act as the first force to enter [la force de première entrée].<sup>308</sup>

The African desk at the Élysée and the decision-units dealing with the crisis in Mali at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs raised concerns over the political implications of such an intervention and the impact it would have on France's image in the world. Consequently, for a long time they opposed this option. Only when the strict non-interventionist discourse became incompatible with other elements that defined decision-makers' self-understanding did the opposition wane and the entire political elite could be united behind the idea of a French intervention. The conflict between the principle of non-intervention, on the

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<sup>307</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014. *'C'est des interventions de nature très différente. La Côte d'Ivoire, la moitié de l'Afrique était contre cette opération. L'Afrique du Sud était contre cette opération. L'Union Africaine était divisée. La Libye, l'Union Africaine était contre cette opération. La différence c'est ça. Les deux opérations au Mali et en RCA n'auraient pas été réalisées si l'Afrique était contre. Hors, dans un cas comme dans l'autre l'Afrique était pour et l'Afrique était avec nous.'*

<sup>308</sup> Interview with civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 5 February 2014. *'Ça c'est le principe, mais après il y a la pratique. Et la pratique c'est que la force africaine en attente n'existait pas. C'étaient toujours des forces ad hoc qui se sont mis en œuvre. Ce ne sont pas des forces qui ont la puissance opérationnelle suffisante pour repousser une offensive telle que de Konna. Ça n'est pas contradictoire dans la mesure que les Africains sont là, et ils jouent un rôle de premier plan, mais il y a l'échelon de la force de première entrée qui pour l'instant est déficiente.'*

one hand, and the perceived necessity to act on the other explains why France did not intervene earlier, although it was well aware of both the urgency of the situation and the absence of an alternative to a unilateral intervention.<sup>309</sup> The interviews conducted for this study in the aftermath of the military intervention confirm that the proclaimed rupture between the socialist government's approach and those of its predecessors was framed in terms of African participation and support. Rather than saying, "no intervention in Africa", French decision-makers argued that for the time being there will be no military interventions without full African support.<sup>310</sup> This allowed the actors to accommodate their previous opposition to a military operation with the subsequent presidential decision.

In summary, French decision-makers convinced themselves of the necessity of Operation Serval after both the European and the African-led operations did not develop in the way intended by French foreign policy-makers. Seen from Paris, everything possible had been done to share the responsibility of the crisis solution. However, no other country seemed sufficiently concerned, willing, or capable of resolving the crisis. This in turn obliged France to act as the initiator of the problem's solution. When promoting the then upcoming Élysée summit on African peace and security, the French president made it clear in front of a group of French expatriates in South Africa that the intervention in Mali was exceptional for France's new security approach to Africa. Resorting to a counterfactual argument, Hollande defended the apparent ambiguity in France's actions saying that 'we did it, because there were no other options. If France [had not intervened], no one would have done it. If no one had done it, the terrorists would have carried the day' (Hollande 2013o).<sup>311</sup>

A certain resignation vis-à-vis European and African solutions reigned over the ranks of French elites in January 2013. One of Fabius's advisors captures this sentiment when stating, 'France would be pleased if it could share these things. However, in reality, although we may not be the only ones, we are still the first ones. We do it and we will continue doing it'.<sup>312</sup> Others are more explicit and describe

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<sup>309</sup> Interview with policy officer at the DCSD, Paris, 18 February 2014.

<sup>310</sup> Cyrille Le Déaut, policy advisor at the French embassy, interview by author, Paris, 30 August 2013.

<sup>311</sup> *'Nous l'avons fait au Mali, dans des conditions exceptionnelles.... Nous l'avons fait parce qu'il n'y avait pas d'autres possibilités. Si ce n'était pas la France, ce n'était personne. Si ce n'était personne, c'étaient les terroristes qui l'emportaient'*.

<sup>312</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014. *'Si d'autres pays que la France voudrait le faire on serait ravi pour partager les choses. Mais la réalité c'est qu'on n'est pas les seuls mais on est les premiers. On le fait et on continuera à le faire'*.

Operation Serval as the consequence of an outright failure of the proposed multilateral approaches to the crisis solution.<sup>313</sup> When the events unfolded in January 2013 and required a quick decision, all actors agreed that Europe would be unable to react within the limited time frame the rebels' recent move had imposed on the problem solution.

### ***The Conceptual Maps behind the Decision***

While the absence of an effective multilateral solution gradually convinced French decision-makers to take a more active role in the conflict resolution, the actors' emotional bounds with West Africa as well as the policy-makers' understanding of France's role in the world cannot be left disregarded when explaining the decision to intervene. By looking at the conceptual maps with which French elites constructed the security narrative one can identify a high degree of proximity. From proximity derive notions of responsibility, friendship, which in turn influence the role perceptions of French elites. President Hollande himself expressed these sentiments most clearly when saying, 'I am responsible, because I am at the head of a country that has a link with Africa, because we [are] connected with this continent, because there are populations that blended by being mobile, by moving, I have a particular responsibility, thus, I am keen that France takes the initiative' (Hollande 2013b).<sup>314</sup> Speaking in New York on 26 September 2012, Hollande proclaimed 'France, I would like to remind you, and I confirm, will assume all its *responsibilities* while leaving the Africans the capacity and the legitimacy to undertake this intervention' (Hollande 2012g, emphasis added).<sup>315</sup> The notion of responsibility was one

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<sup>313</sup> Michel Goya, colonel, interview by author, Paris, 10 January 2014.

<sup>314</sup> '*Mais j'ai la responsabilité, parce que je suis à la tête d'un pays qui a un lien avec l'Afrique, parce que nous solidaires de ce continent, parce qu'il y a des populations qui se sont mélangées par la mobilité, par les déplacements, j'ai une responsabilité particulière et donc je tiens à ce que la France soit à l'initiative*'. Similar utterances can be observed at various instances in the French security discourse. For instance, on the occasion of the Élysée Summit for Peace and Security in Africa on 5 December 2013, that is one day after the launching of Operation Sangaris in the CAR, Hollande emphasised how the perceived proximity with the African continent creates emotional bounds and a pronounced sense of responsibility for the francophone African region, which are part of the French elites' role perception: 'France is aware of what is expected of her. It deduces from this at the same time geographic, sentimental, cultural, linguistic, [and] economic proximity [with Africa] a particular responsibility' (Hollande 2013m) ('*La France est consciente de ce qui est attendu d'elle. Elle déduit de cette proximité - à la fois géographique, sentimentale, culturelle, linguistique, économique -, elle déduit de cette proximité une responsabilité particulière*').

<sup>315</sup> '*La France, je le rappelle ici, je le confirme, prendra toutes ses responsabilités tout en laissant aux Africains la capacité, la légitimité de mener cette intervention*'.



of the core elements during both the pre- and post-intervention discourse. Actors referred to the term as an element of motivation, explanation, and justification, often without any further specification of its meaning.<sup>316</sup> Hollande, on the day of Operation Serval's launch defended his decision in front of the diplomatic corps by saying that preventing the terrorists' offensive is a 'question of solidarity and responsibility' (Hollande 2013q).<sup>317</sup>

Responsibility has a multitude of different meanings, which taken together constitute a core explanatory factor of the French decision. The term is used to describe France's historical responsibility towards Africa. The colonial experience and its heritage made French elites feel more concerned with the Sahel and West Africa than decision-makers in any other country. Notwithstanding the fact that more than half a century had passed since France's former colonies gained independence, French decision-makers acknowledged the impact of their predecessors' practices on the contemporary security state of francophone Africa: 'We also have some responsibilities. The African states are as they are because we created these states. We drew these stupid borders during the time of colonisation. We divided them into those ethnic groups. We linked the Tuareg and the Malians. One could argue that we did this 50 years ago...still...France is a little bit responsible for all this'.<sup>318</sup> In the words of a ministerial advisor, 'colonialism created a relationship between the colonising and the colonised countries that continues to last well after the end of the decolonisation'.<sup>319</sup> These and other statements are in line with the findings of Brysk, Parsons and Sandholtz (2002, 268), who—in their discussion on postcolonial relationships—argue that 'historically conditioned notions of collective, familial relations motivate the European powers to maintain distinctive types of relations with their former colonies'. This claim can be specified further by arguing that the colonial past as an antipode to present action constrained policy-makers in their choice and thus narrowed the list of available options. Although several elements in the French discourse point towards the colonial dimension of responsibility, this view remains contested

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<sup>316</sup> For a general discussion of the emerging international norm of R2P see (Bellamy and Williams 2011).

<sup>317</sup> *'Elle le fera strictement dans le cadre des résolutions du conseil de sécurité des Nations-Unies et elle sera prête à arrêter l'offensive des terroristes si elle devait se poursuivre, car c'est une exigence de solidarité et de responsabilité'*.

<sup>318</sup> Vincent Desportes, general in the French Army, interview by author, Paris, 12 January 2014. *'On a aussi des responsabilités. Les états africains sont comme ils sont, parce que c'est nous qui les avons fait ces états. C'est nous qui avons dressé ces frontières stupides pendant la colonisation. C'est nous qui les avons coupés en ethnies, qui ont rattaché les Touaregs aux Maliens etc. On peut dire, on a fait ça, il y a 50 ans, mais néanmoins. La France est un peu responsable de ça'*.

<sup>319</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of the interior, Paris, 12 February 2014.

among French elites. Other interviewees excluded colonial responsibility or some sort of late penitence for France's colonial past as a motivation or justification of the French decision from the outset.<sup>320</sup>

Actors were more likely to agree when the term was employed with reference to the First and the Second World Wars. Repeatedly, French decision-makers pointed to their country's debt vis-à-vis the African continent. Responsibility became synonymous for 'the awareness of historical and emotional links'. According to one policy advisor, 'all these populations gave a lot for France. This is the idea of responsibility. We have a common history and today we cannot say, "These are your problems and we let you down"'.<sup>321</sup> Acknowledging the importance of Africa's contributions to France's war efforts, it is still surprising that Hollande publicly emphasised the historical dimension of responsibility seventy years after the end of the Second World War; in particular given the president's determination of wanting to break with the past. On the occasion of his first state visit to Mali, Hollande affirmed in Bamako, 'We fight in fraternity, Malians, French, Africans, because I do not forget that when France was attacked, when it was looking for help, for allies, when its territorial unity was threatened, who came to help? It was Africa, it was Mali. Thanks, thanks to Mali. Today, we are repaying our debt' (Hollande 2013g).<sup>322</sup> Statements like this support the view that the concept of historical responsibility remained an important element in the mental maps which French actors used in order to approach the crisis in Mali. Despite affirmations to the contrary, the idea of a historically grown responsibility directly influenced the decision-making process and reinforced the conviction that a military operation was necessary. The outcome itself, that is, a quasi-unilateral intervention, is partly based on the actors' 'subjective reading of history' (Welch 2005, 11). In reacting to the rebels' offensive with a counter-offensive French decision-makers fell back into old patterns of behaviour. Over the past fifty years, the French Army had successfully intervened many times in what seemed similar situations. Against that backdrop, French

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<sup>320</sup> Interview with policy officer at the DCSD, Paris, 18 February 2014.

<sup>321</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of the interior, Paris, 12 February 2014. '*C'est la conscience qu'on a un lien historique, émotionnelle. Pour un Français, les Sénégalais c'étaient aussi nos soldats. Toutes ces populations ont beaucoup donné pour la France. C'est ça l'idée de la responsabilité. On a une histoire commune et on ne peut pas dire aujourd'hui vous êtes dans les problèmes et on vous laisse tomber*'.

<sup>322</sup> '*Nous nous battons en fraternité, Maliens, Français, Africains parce que moi je n'oublie pas que lorsque la France a été elle-même attaquée, lorsqu'elle cherchait des soutiens, des alliés, lorsqu'elle était menacée pour son unité territoriale, qui est venu alors ? C'est l'Afrique, c'est le Mali. Merci, merci au Mali. Nous payons aujourd'hui notre dette à votre égard*'. Several policy-makers within the French state apparatus were sincerely surprised and regretted the president's decision to put the blood debt forward as one of the core elements of his speech in Bamako.

actors convinced themselves that a successful outcome of the operation was indeed possible, notwithstanding all uncertainties and idiosyncrasies that accompanied the crisis in Mali.

When evoking the notion of responsibility, actors referred to France's role in the UN Security Council even more than to the historical dimension. Being one of the five permanent members of this international institution that describes itself as bearing 'the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security' (United Nations 2014) creates certain expectations among French actors and their foreign counterparts. In addition to France's overall commitment to the global security architecture, France for long has advocated the adoption of an African seat in the Security Council. As long as Africa is not represented in the Security Council, France will remain the self-declared defender of African interests in this institution.<sup>323</sup> In conjunction, these two aspects make for a strong explanatory factor for the president's decision to respond to the Malian government's quests for assistance. As Hollande's former spokesperson Romain Nadal underlined, 'We are a permanent member of the Security Council, we have a particular role to play in Africa, because we have strong ties to this continent. We have very, very strong ties. Therefore, the president considers that we must intervene when called upon by the Africans. This was the case in Mali'.<sup>324</sup> The perceived responsibility by agents working in the name of a *puissance d'influence* can be considered as one of the principal motivations that led to Operation Serval. The relationship between responsibility and action, that is, discourse and practices, is likewise an issue of credibility. As one French colonel put it, 'from the moment you are responsible, you take risks. If not, you must not be responsible'.<sup>325</sup>

The same applies to France's military capacities. An effective military apparatus, it might be argued, can only be considered such when it can be used to defend the causes for which the nation aspires to stand. The idea that its military capacity obliges France to act remained one of the central themes of the official discourse. During the interviews I conducted for this study, I repeatedly encountered the following argument: 'We have a responsibility, because we have a certain expertise in Africa. The fact

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<sup>323</sup> Xavier Collignon, vice-director of the DAS, interview by author, Paris, 6 August 2013.

<sup>324</sup> Romain Nadal, former spokesperson of François Hollande, interview by author, Paris, 7 October 2013.

'On est membre permanent du Conseil de Sécurité, on a un rôle particulier à jouer en Afrique, parce qu'on a des liens forts avec ce continent. On a des liens très, très forts. Donc le Président considère qu'à ce titre là on doit intervenir si on est sollicité par les Africains. Ce qui était le cas pour le Mali'.

<sup>325</sup> Xavier Collignon, vice-director of the DAS, interview by author, Paris, 6 August 2013. 'À partir du moment où vous êtes responsable, vous prenez des risques. Sinon, on ne doit pas être responsable'.

that we have got the capacities also means that we must use them'.<sup>326</sup> Not only does France still have the expertise and military capacities needed to conduct successful operations on the African continent, it is also the only actor that unites in itself the institutional design and political will necessary for the conduct of rapid interventions.<sup>327</sup> This capacity not only obliged France to take action, it also served as a justification once the decision was taken. Romain Nadal, former spokesperson for François Hollande, argued with regard to the request for assistance issued by Mali's interim president, 'if they turn to us, they judge us capable of creating their security'.<sup>328</sup>

Be it in Europe, at the UN, or in Africa, foreign policy-makers expected France to be the first country to take a stance regarding the crisis in Mali. Put differently, France's role enactment as a *puissance d'influence* with a special interest in Africa created so-called role expectations. Role expectations are interbehavioural and as such 'concern the performance of any individual in a social position relative to individuals occupying other positions' (Thies 2009, 9). They bridge between the individual, or a group of individuals, and the social structure. These expectations confirmed the *role conceptions* (expectations held by the role occupant) of French elites with regard to Africa's security and further reinforced the feeling of responsibility they had developed towards the Malian state (2009, 9). According to Sarbin and Allen (1968, 510–14) role demands constrain leaders in particular situations by calling 'for a specific role enactment' (Thies 2009, 10). Former Minister for Development Pascal Canfin put it as follows, 'France is about to define a security and humanitarian response to the present crisis. There are great expectations among our European partners as well as among our partners in the Sahel vis-à-vis France. With respect to this zone, we have a responsibility that we need to take on' (Canfin 2012a).<sup>329</sup>

In a sense, France seems to disprove Chandler's (2007, 372) point on the 'growing disjunction between UN Security Council resolutions and its practices', just like the claim that 'political elites are keen to express the rhetoric of high moral responsibility in the international sphere but are reluctant to

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<sup>326</sup> Interview with policy officer at the DCSD, Paris, 18 February 2014. '*On a une responsabilité parce qu'on a une expertise en Afrique, le fait qu'on a les capacités veut aussi dire qu'il faut les utiliser*'.

<sup>327</sup> Michel Goya, colonel, interview by author, Paris, 10 January 2014.

<sup>328</sup> Romain Nadal, former spokesperson for François Hollande, interview by author, Paris, 7 October 2013. '*Et si eux se tourne vers nous, ils jugent que nous sommes capables, aptes à faire cette sécurité*'.

<sup>329</sup> '*La France travaille à définir une réponse sécuritaire et humanitaire à la crise actuelle. Il y a chez nos partenaires européens comme au Sahel une forte attente vis-à-vis de la France. Nous avons à l'égard de cette zone une responsabilité qu'il nous faut assumer*'.

take responsibility for either policy-making or policy outcomes' (Chandler 2007, 381). Put differently, the criticism of a growing misfit between rhetoric and practices does not fit with France's position in the UN Security Council. In particular, when it comes to security in francophone Africa, one can argue with confidence that French governments not only talk the talk but also walk the walk. References to the notion of responsibility are not only an integral part of the official discourse but also determine France's political and strategic culture.

The sentiment of responsibility was further enhanced by the notion of friendship that French and Malian actors employed to describe their relationship. By framing their decision as that of an actor assisting a friend in need, French policy-makers anthropomorphised both the bilateral relationship as such and the decision they had produced in the name of France. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, rather than the state being another state's friend, it is the foreign policy elites who consider themselves more or less related to their counterparts in another state. Friendship in this regard shapes the relationship between states and influences decision-making processes by pushing for action. Berenskoetter (2007, 670) defines friendship in international relations as a 'process of building a "common world" to which states become emotionally attached'. Repeatedly, French decision-makers emphasised that France was a friend of Africa and a friend of Mali. Friendship, Hollande stated, 'creates obligations' (Hollande 2012i). Thus by declaring themselves a friend of Mali and the region, French actors became directly concerned and felt obliged to assist in the problem solution (Fabius 2012c). In other words, the perceived friendship facilitated the French intervention insofar as it made action morally indispensable.<sup>330</sup> As Hollande put it, 'For us, it is not about conquering a territory, increasing our influence, or seeking whatever commercial or economic interest. These times are over. In contrast, our country—because it is France—must help a *friend*' (Hollande 2013h, emphasis added).<sup>331</sup> The two elements that come to the forefront in this statement relate to the self-understanding of French decision-makers as well as to the emotional dimension of decision-making processes.

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<sup>330</sup> Although Aristotle emphasised the selflessness of true friendship, friendship, it can be argued will always be based on some sort of reciprocity. That is to say, France, in exchange for its good deed can expect some political favour and if it is only the prolongation of the Franco-African common world.

<sup>331</sup> *'Je sais bien qu'ici comme ailleurs, vous comprenez l'enjeu. Il n'est pas pour nous que conquérir un territoire, de vouloir accroître notre influence ou de chercher je ne sais quel intérêt commercial ou économique. Ce temps-là est fini. En revanche, notre pays parce que c'est la France doit venir en aide à un pays ami.'*

Emotions played an important role in the French discourse on Africa and francophone Africa in particular. References to emotional bounds that ran through the French discourse directly affected the decision to intervene. A president who declared himself as being ‘very much attached’ to Africa (Hollande 2012h) was joined by a minister for development who followed the crisis in Mali ‘with much attention and much emotion’ (Canfin 2012b), and a foreign minister who, when seeking allies across West Africa, declared himself to ‘love Senegal’ (Fabius 2012d), to affirm collectively their ‘sadness’ about the collapse of the Malian state.<sup>332</sup> Bleiker and Hutchison (2008, 116), in their study on emotions in world politics, find empathy and compassion to be central explanatory variables of the making of world politics. Elsewhere in the same text they state, drawing on Mercer (1995), that ‘questions of affect play a crucial role in determining how individual and collective identities are constituted, thus also shaping perceptions of the international system and the threats it may pose to states’ (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008, 122). According to Marcus, emotions in politics have been used ‘to explain why people deviate from their characteristic disposition’ (Marcus 2003, 222). Drawing on these findings, I would suggest that the decision for intervention, to some extent, can be explained with reference to the emotional attachment French actors feel when Africa’s security is concerned. As a close advisor to Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian stated, ‘Mali ... is part of us, or at least of our history....The extremely close ties that persist between Africa and France make us consider ourselves more legitimate than others [to act]. The path we have to cross mentally to imagine rescuing Mali is rather short.’<sup>333</sup> In addition, emotional bounds give decision-makers the necessary domestic support to conduct military operations in Africa. As one pundit observed, ‘François Hollande can say, “I commit myself militarily in Africa, I will have to deplore some casualties, but I do it” because the French will always feel something with regard to Africa’.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Interestingly, these sentiments seem to be shared by their African counterparts who continue to speak of a ‘question of love’ (Boni, Yayi 2012) in order to describe their close relationship.

<sup>333</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 16 September 2013. *‘Le Mali dans l’esprit général français, c’est une partie de nous-mêmes, en tout cas c’est une partie de notre histoire.... Donc, le lien extrêmement étroit entretenu entre cet Afrique là et la France, fait que non pas nous nous sentons plus légitime que d’autres, mais le chemin qu’on doit parcourir mentalement pour imaginer de venir en secours du Mali est assez simple’.*

<sup>334</sup> Vincent Desportes, general in the French Army, interview by author, Paris, 12 January 2014. *‘François Hollande peut dire je m’engage militairement en Afrique, je vais avoir des morts, mais je le fais, parce que les Français vont toujours sentir quelque chose par rapport à l’Afrique’.* While this statement illustrates once more consensus of the elite with regard to military interventions in Africa, it is questionable whether this attitude can

Arguably, the biggest amplifier of the perceived emotional bounds between French and African elites is the common language. France's commitment to the *Francophonie* organisation remains considerable and references to a common language and culture were abundant in the discourse on the crisis solution in Mali. When asked how to explain the notion of proximity, almost all my interlocutors responded by saying, 'first we are united by the language we share'.<sup>335</sup> As shown above, French actors consider their language to be more than a means of communication, but also a vehicle of norms and values, and as one of several foreign policy instruments that allow them to exercise political influence on the African continent.<sup>336</sup>

...speaking the French language, which is an African language here, also means passing on values, carrying a message, inspiring peoples; speaking French means speaking the language of freedom, means speaking the language of dignity, means speaking the language of cultural diversity. This is your language this is our language, we share this language. Let us circulate it, let us carry it, let us do everything that those who speak this language will have an advantage compared to those who do not.<sup>337</sup> (Hollande 2013g)

By reinforcing the sentiments of proximity, responsibility, and togetherness among French and African elites, the common language influenced the decision-making processes and facilitated the military intervention in several ways. First, by simplifying the communication between Malian and French elites, the common language promoted an early perception and understanding of what was happening on the ground. Second, French language promotion and cultural policies were employed as a preventive means of counteracting the increasing influence of AQIM in the region. Finally, the French language is interlinked with the perception French elites have of their own country and its role in the international system.

Much has been written about French *grandeur* and how it influences the country's foreign policy-

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actually be generalised to the whole of French society. By attributing their own cognitive schemata to the entire French society, foreign policy-makers universalise an elite culture and by so doing auto-legitimize their actions.

<sup>335</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of the interior, Paris, 12 February 2014. '*Ce qui m'a frappé toutes les fois quand on a rencontré les Africains, d'abord on est uni on partage la même langue. Ce n'est pas rien. Tous les élites africaines aiment la France, aiment de venir, trouvent que c'est vraiment un pays frère*'.

<sup>336</sup> Niagalé Bagayoko-Penone, policy advisor at the Francophonie organisation, interview by author, Paris, 20 September 2013.

<sup>337</sup> '*Parce que parler une langue, parler la langue française, qui est ici une langue africaine, c'est aussi transmettre des valeurs, porter des messages, inspirer des peuples ; parler la langue française, c'est parler la langue de la liberté, c'est parler la langue de la dignité, c'est parler la langue de la diversité culturelle. C'est votre langue, c'est notre langue, nous l'avons en commun. Diffusons-la, portons-la et faisons en sorte que ceux qui la parlent aient une chance de plus que les autres*'.

making (Cerny 1980; Gordon 1993). As argued above, the problem with this concept, which was developed to describe France's foreign policy behaviour under Charles de Gaulle, is that it is somewhat dated and no longer fits with contemporary foreign policy discourses and practices. I, therefore, rely on the notion of *puissance d'influence* to examine the self-understanding of French elites and its impact on decision-making processes. The notion of *puissance d'influence* (influential power) is in many regards similar to the concept of *grandeur*, but has been adapted to the characteristics of international relations in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. For Yves Gounin the concept of *puissance d'influence* and the discourses and practices that derive from it are an expression of 'schizophrenia'. On the one hand, French leaders continue to emphasise France's grandeur, its position in the international system, its dominant role in Africa, and its place in history, on the other they are well aware of the limits of this narrative given the size of France and both its financial and political constraints.<sup>338</sup> This co-occurrence of a proactive foreign policy and a certain number of constraints resulted in a policy that supported a multilateral problem solution. In the end however, the Hollande administration did not stop short from unilateral action. While the goal of Operation Serval was to save Mali's sovereignty, it just as much served to safeguard France's own identity. As the president proclaimed on the evening of his decision,

France is an active and engaged power, which has this ambition of being useful in the world that surrounds it. This ambition is not new, but derives from our history, which makes us hold a series of principles and values, which we have not invented exclusively for ourselves, but which we share with the entire world: democracy, human rights, a balance of power (*une conception équilibrée*), the will to avoid any hegemony or power, and the intention to always resort to international organisations to allow for peace and security.<sup>339</sup> (Hollande 2013q)

The idea of France being a *puissance d'influence* can only be maintained if French actors make national and international audiences believe that France is actually assuming this self-imposed role. Africa remains the first region where France can give proof of its political and military capacities. Accordingly, in January 2013 after all multilateral efforts had failed to materialise and the sovereignty of a state within France's special zone of influence was threatened, a French president, who holds that

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<sup>338</sup> Yves Gounin, privy counsellor, interview by author, Paris, 26 June 2013.

<sup>339</sup> 'La France est une puissance active, engagée, qui a cette ambition d'être utile au monde qui l'entoure. C'est une ambition qui n'est pas nouvelle, qui vient de notre histoire, qui fait que nous portons des valeurs, des principes qui ne sont pas ceux que nous avons inventé pour nous-mêmes mais ceux que nous donnons en partage à l'ensemble du monde ; la démocratie, les droits de l'Homme, une conception équilibrée, la volonté d'éviter toute hégémonie ou toute puissance et le souci qu'il y ait à chaque fois le recours aux organisations internationales pour permettre la paix et la sécurité'.



‘France is not just any country in Europe and its president not just any head of state in the world [and who] ... intends to emphasise France’s international ambition’<sup>340</sup> (Hollande 2012i) could not afford to stand and watch but had to act. In this regard, it is particularly interesting to note that the crisis was primarily not about Mali, but about the entire West African region, if not the continent as a whole. In November 2012 Fabius said he ‘felt a [general] realisation that this was not only about Mali—although at the heart of the problem—but, I almost dare to say, about the future of the whole of Africa’ (Fabius 2012i).<sup>341</sup> Put differently, the crisis could have happened in any of France’s former African colonies and would have provoked the same or a similar reaction on the part of France’s foreign policy elite.

The claim that this decision was as much about France’s own identity as about solving the security crisis in the Sahel can be confirmed when looking at the reactions to operation Serval of both African and French actors. Four weeks into the intervention, Hollande travelled to Mali to announce the first military successes and to symbolically introduce the second phase of the military operation that consisted of stabilising the country, enabling the holding of elections, and conducting counterinsurgency missions. On this and subsequent occasions the Malian elite cheered the values and principles of the Fifth Republic and praised the French state for its rapid and determined reaction. Statements such the following by Mali’s interim President Dioncounda Traoré provided the necessary acceptance and confirmation of the role France intended to play in Mali and in Africa when saying, ‘Representatives of Timbuktu tell François Hollande, president of France, the France of the 1789 revolution, the president of a France that cherishes liberty, equality, and fraternity, that he is the brother of all Malians, the brother of all inhabitants of the Sahel, and true friend all Africa (Traoré 2013).<sup>342</sup> Against the backdrop of these eulogies, François Hollande elevated his decision to launch Operation Serval as the most important of all events in his entire political life: ‘I want to say that today I have experienced the most important day of my political life. At one point, a decision had to be taken committing the lives of men and women. I

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<sup>340</sup> *‘La France n’est pas n’importe quel pays d’Europe et son président n’est pas n’importe quel chef d’État du monde...j’entends donner à la France toute sa place dans l’affirmation d’une ambition internationale’.*

<sup>341</sup> *‘Toute une série de personnalités y sont intervenues, notamment le président français. J’ai senti physiquement une prise de conscience que ce n’était pas simplement la question du Mali - au demeurant très importante - qui était posée, mais j’allais dire presque le devenir de l’ensemble de l’Afrique’.*

<sup>342</sup> *‘Représentants de Tombouctou, dites à François Hollande, le Président de la France, la France de la Révolution de 1789, la Président de la France de la Liberté, de l’Égalité et de la Fraternité, qu’il est le frère de toutes les Maliennes, de tous les Maliens, le frère de toutes les Sahéliennes, de tous les Sahéliens, l’ami sincère de l’Afrique toute entière’.*

took this decision in the name of France. This decision honours France. Through the clamours, fervours, and the support you show me, you are showing the highest respect to the whole of France (Hollande 2013g).<sup>343</sup>

In France, foreign policy-making takes up a core place in the decision-makers' role conception. While this statement applies to foreign policy-making in general, France's policy towards Africa has the most distinctive influence on French actors' national role conception. This is also due to the fact that French actors find an audience in their former special zone of influence that is willing to accept their self-imposed role conception. As Brummer and Thies argue (2014, 4) 'the role location process for a state involves the acknowledgment and acceptance of NRCs [national role conceptions] by other states' to complete this social act of role creation. France's former colonies exercise this mirror function par excellence. In the case of the Malian crisis they not only provided the locus of French action but also acted as an affirmative audience. Audiences, in general, fulfill several functions. They guide the foreign policy performer, they either negatively or positively sanction actions, they contribute to the maintenance of an actor's specific behavior over time, and most importantly they serve as confirmation of an actor's subjective reality (Thies 2009, 11). François Hollande's subsequent invitation as the only non-African head of state to the 50 year anniversary of the AU and the positive reception by African heads of state of the Summit for Peace and Security in Africa, which took place in Paris in December 2013, confirmed the French president's decision and allocated France the role it intended to play in the international system.

### 4.3 Conclusion: The Fight among Principles

In this chapter, I demonstrated how the French decision to intervene in Mali developed gradually. A decade had passed from the early perception of the emergence of a threat in the Sahel to the actual decision to deploy ground troops. The Hollande administration brought the decision-making process

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<sup>343</sup> *'Et moi, je veux ici vous dire que je viens de vivre la journée la plus importante de ma vie politique. Parce que, à un moment, une décision doit être prise, elle engage la vie d'hommes et de femmes. Cette décision, je l'ai prise au nom de la France. Cette décision, elle honore la France et à travers les clameurs, la ferveur, le soutien que vous m'apportez, c'est à toute la France que vous donnez votre plus grand hommage'.*

from the perception stage to the policy framing and finally action phases. In other words, the Hollande administration 'securitised' (Buzan, Waeber, and Wilde 1998) the situation in Mali in order to solve it. To address the initial question of how and why the shift from a no-boots-on-the-ground policy to a quasi-unilateral French intervention occurred, I engaged with the French discourse and isolated the various cognitive maps and rhetoric devices that were employed by French foreign policy elites throughout the decision-making process. At the time actors possessed clear mental maps when engaging in securitisation discourses on the African continent. This is not anymore the case, struggles between different paradigms explain the changing course of French foreign policy.

Whilst being subject to changes and struggles, the debate on France's military intervention in Mali does not support the thesis of French policy-making being in a state of confusion (Bovcon 2012; Cumming 2013). By looking at the process, the idea that the president's decision was the expression of ad hoc policy-making could be discarded very quickly. Instead of being simply the reaction to a quickly changing situation on the ground, French decision-makers had familiarised themselves gradually with the crisis in Mali and little by little made room for a unilateral military solution. The examination of the different dimensions of proximity showed how French actors incorporated the Malian crisis on their political agenda before elevating it to their absolute priority. These findings are in line with arguments about preference formation and preference change advanced by cognitive science. For long, cognitive scientist have argued that new or changing 'preferences are not created out of thin air; they evolve from refinements of existing preferences' (Druckman and Lupia 2000, 7).

Critics of discursive approaches consider the shift in the French position a case to disprove the relevance of political rhetoric and discursive material. To counter this criticism I had to demonstrate that, notwithstanding the fundamental shift in the French position, the cognitive maps approach maintained its explanatory power. Rather than discarding the impact of mental maps outright, I showed that the precise moment of the decision, just as the decision itself, resulted from the co-occurrence of contradictory principles. In fact, France's foreign policy elites were torn between their commitment to a multilateral, European, and African solution, and the perceived idea that it was France's responsibility to solve the crisis in Mali. These two convictions provoked conflicts not only within the French state apparatus, but also within individual decision-makers. Most of the actors who were more inclined

towards unilateral intervention, were initially situated in the Ministry of Defence and among the military. In both institutions, actors soon were convinced that the degradation of the situation in Mali could only be brought to a halt with the help of French troops (Notin 2014, 122). During a state visit in Chad in July 2014 Hollande implied that the driving forces of Operation Serval had been located in the Ministry of Defence and among the Joint Chiefs of Military Staff. The president, emphasising Chad's important support during the operation, stated '*when on proposal of the minister of defence and the chief of staff, I had to decide a troop deployment to fight against terrorists, it was you, it was here, from Ndjamen, that the first planes departed*' (Hollande 2014e, emphasis added).<sup>344</sup> Notin (2014, 128) describes the almost comic situation by the end of 2012 in which 'the military prepared themselves for a war that the diplomats tried to avoid'. The closer January 2013 came, the broader the support for a military intervention became. In the end, the president's decision could be presented as a consensus between Hollande, his advisors, and the different ministries, which benefitted from broad cross-party support. The intervention did not eradicate the multilateral rhetoric from the French discourse. In contrast, Operation Serval was framed as an intervention that France conducted in the name of the international community and for the sake of Mali. Four months after the beginning of the military campaign, Hollande continued to argue 'that it is the Africans who need to assure their own defence, also with regard to terrorism. But for all that France is not going to withdraw...we need to support Africa's security' (Hollande 2013j).<sup>345</sup> Finally, the perceived responsibility won over the constraints and limits imposed by the operational environment and previous discourses. Proximity, responsibility, and friendship were among the principal heuristics that explain why the French president, in agreement with his administration, was able to take on the risk and send French troops to the Sahel.

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<sup>344</sup> '*Lorsqu'il s'est agi de déclencher l'intervention au Mali, au début de l'année 2013, lorsque sur la proposition du ministre de la Défense, du Chef d'Etat-Major, il fallut que je décide de l'engagement des forces, pour arrêter des terroristes, c'est vous, c'est d'ici, de Ndjamen que sont partis les avions qui ont permis d'obtenir les premiers résultats. Je sais donc ce que la France vous doit et le Mali plus encore*'.

<sup>345</sup> '*Ce sont les Africains qui doivent assurer leur propre défense, y compris par rapport au terrorisme. Mais pour autant, la France ne va pas se désengager. Ce que nous pouvons apporter au-delà de ce que nous faisons déjà pour le développement, pour l'économie. Mais nous devons apporter un soutien à la sécurité de l'Afrique.*

## Chapter Five

# Avoiding a Second Rwanda: Peacekeeping in the Central African Republic

*...men gladly change their ruler, thinking to better themselves. This belief causes them to take up arms against their ruler, but they fool themselves in this, since they then see through experience that matters have become worse. This stems from another natural and ordinary necessity, which is that a new prince must always harm his subjects, both with his soldiers as well as with his countless other injuries involved in his new conquest.*

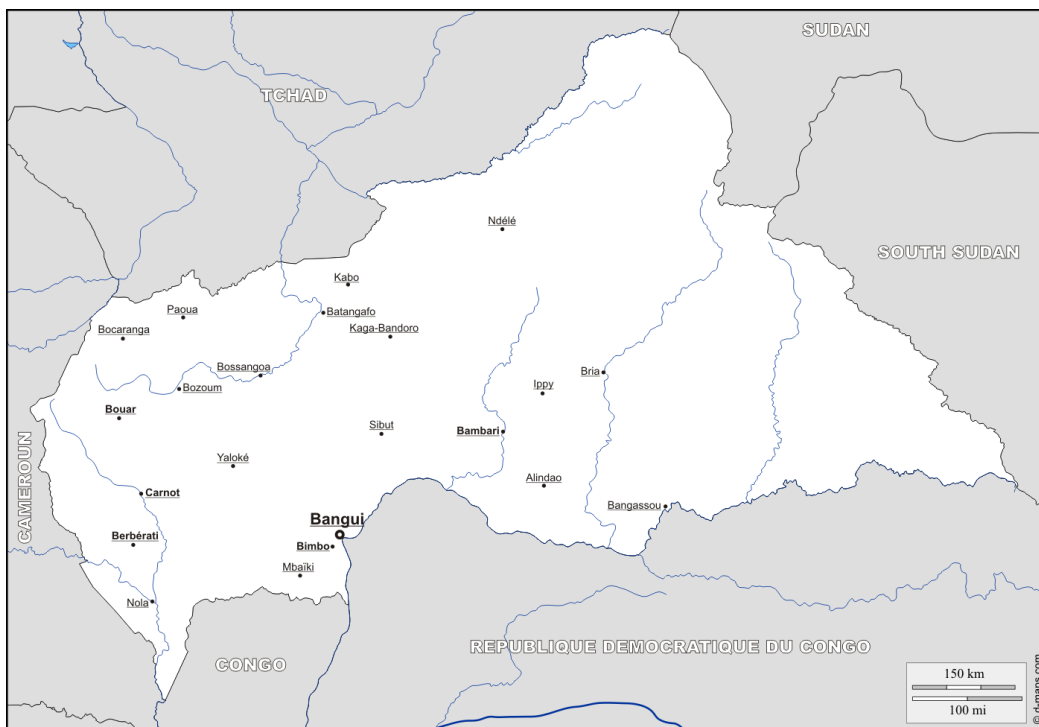
—Niccolò Machiavelli

*L'inaction n'était pas une option.*

—Jean-Marc Ayrault

*En République centrafricaine, notre objectif a été d'éviter ce qu'on a appelé, peut-être trop rapidement, un génocide. Je rappelle que la veille du jour où nous sommes intervenus, 1.000 personnes ont été tuées dans le pays. Cette intervention a eu lieu à la demande des Nations unies, de l'Union africaine et de la République centrafricaine.*

—Laurent Fabius



**Figure 9. Central African Republic, borders, rivers, principal cities**

Source: [http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num\\_car=14154&lang=de](http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=14154&lang=de), accessed on 17 July 2014

While the world watched French armed forces fighting against terrorist and criminal groups in the Sahel, another state in France's special zone of influence plunged into chaos: the Central African Republic (CAR). In the second half of 2012 the rebel alliance Seleka<sup>346</sup> (alliance in Sango) started a rebellion against the government in place. By January 2013, the Seleka had taken over large parts of the country and subsequently—after a failed peace agreement—ousted the then President François Bozizé in a military coup on 24 March 2013 to replace him by one of their own leaders, Michel Djotodia. Djotodia pledged to install a transitional government that would allow for the return of stability and permit democratic elections. However, over the course of the following months Djotodia and his administration increasingly lost control over their followers. Notwithstanding desperate calls for restraint by Djotodia and his acolytes leading to the eventual dissolution of the alliance, uncontrolled Seleka combatants took advantage of their dominant position and began looting Bangui's Christian neighbourhoods and government strongholds as well as uncounted villages on their way to the capital. Some of these fighters considered their actions as revenge for years of neglect on the part of the government, others were simply driven by grief and the lucrative profits they saw in the business of banditry, and again others explained their motivation to loot as a combination of the two factors.

Despite the official dissolution of the Seleka in September 2013, the interethnic clashes in the CAR did not stop. In opposition to the excesses of these ex-rebels, self-defence militias—the so-called anti-balaka—were formed and were soon afterwards joined by members of the former Army, the *forces armées centrafricaines* (FACA).<sup>347</sup> They, too, did not limit their actions to defensive measures but committed atrocities mainly against the country's Muslim minority, and thus gave further momentum to a seemingly endless spiral of reciprocal violence. As in many other civil conflicts the 'protectors

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<sup>346</sup> The Seleka, created in late 2012 and dissolved in September 2013, was an alliance between different rebel groups. The three main factions were the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP), the Patriotic Convention for the Salvation of Kodro (Sango for country) (CPSK), and the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR).

<sup>347</sup> Different explanations exist regarding the origins of the anti-balaka militias and the meaning of their name. While some pundits argue the anti-balaka militias have emerged in reaction to the atrocities committed by ex-Seleka combatants, others hold that they already existed as local militias before the formation of the Seleka. With the Seleka looting across the country, these former self-defence militias then turned into the primary opponent of ex-Seleka fighters and are at the origin of organised violence, lootings, and acts of lynching of mainly Muslim civilians. As for the name, some authors translate anti-balaka as *anti-machete*, while others advance the translation of *anti-balles-AK* (anti AK-47 bullets) (*IRIN News* 2014).

bec[a]me violators, and their appearance cause[d] fear, not security (Mehler 2012, 49). After a new wave of violence, the UN Security Council—headed by France—passed Resolution 2127 on 5 December 2013 and by so doing accorded the French government the sought-after legitimacy to launch Operation Sangaris in support of the African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA). Within a few hours after the vote of the UN Resolution, François Hollande announced the deployment of a French peacekeeping operation.

The present chapter explores the justifications, motivations, and belief systems that prompted the Hollande administration to intervene in yet another conflict in Africa less than twelve months after the beginning of Operation Serval. As the preceding chapter, this chapter scrutinises the actors' motivations by engaging with the different stages of the decision-making process. More precisely, the chapter explores the role of mental maps during the decision-making process and analyses the constraints and opportunities these provided for decision-makers. Notwithstanding the non-negligible differences between the two cases, one cannot understand the French operation in the CAR without taking into account France's action in Mali. While it is true that the nature, legitimacy, and purpose of the two military operations differed greatly, both situations on the ground and the French responses also showed certain similarities. Tardy, for instance, detects important parallels with regard to both the operational environment and the decision-making processes during the two crises.

First of all, if the two situations differ in terms of the specific risks they cover—risk of terrorism in Mali versus risk of mass crimes in the CAR—the two countries are similar in terms of their respective state fragility and extreme weakness of their governance structures. This similarity is important insofar as it affects the policies of crisis management to be put in place....<sup>348</sup> (Tardy 2013, 2–3)

Furthermore, similar conceptual maps and motivations came to the forefront in both cases. Decision-making processes in the context of the CAR were necessarily influenced by the experiences and strategic limitations imposed by the on-going war in Mali. By looking at two instances of securitisation of French foreign policy in sub-Saharan Africa, the scope of the present research can be widened. Moreover, the

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<sup>348</sup> *'Tout d'abord, si les deux situations se distinguent par la spécificité des risques qu'elles recouvrent – risque terroriste au Mali versus risque de crimes de masse en RCA – les deux pays se rejoignent par leur état de fragilité et d'extrême faiblesse de leurs structures de gouvernance. Cette similitude est importante en ce qu'elle informe la nature des politiques de gestion de crise à mettre en place, dans les deux cas de long terme et allant au-delà des seuls aspects sécuritaires pour inclure l'assistance dans le domaine des élections, de la bonne gouvernance, de la réforme des secteurs judiciaire et de sécurité ou du développement'.*

case of the CAR suits itself to verify prior findings within a different context and thus allows for more general claims regarding French decision-making in sub-Saharan Africa under the Hollande administration.<sup>349</sup> In sum, considering both cases allows for a better understanding of France's relationship with the African continent at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, its security policy in that region of the world, and its identity as defender of the present international order.

This chapter begins with a brief description of the 2012-2013 crisis in the CAR. This first section focuses on the origins and dynamics of the crisis. Special attention is paid to the role of religion among the various causes of the conflict as well as France's longstanding military presence in that country. Whereas the French Army disengaged from Mali at the time of independence, it has never truly left the CAR. This continuous French military presence had a direct impact on the decision-making process that precipitated France's latest military operation in Africa. The chapter's second part surveys the decision-making process more closely. It will be shown how and why the French discourse shifted from an initial reluctance to intervene towards an intervention in the name of humanity. The impact of the Rwandan genocide on the decision-making process in the CAR will be illustrated, the assumed relationship between instability and the global war on terrorism highlighted, and the role of empathy as part of the actors self-identity as representatives of an influential power analysed.

## 5.1 The Central African Republic: A Crisis-Ridden Phantom State

The CAR has been considered a failed or phantom state for most of its post-independence existence (International Crisis Group 2007, i). As a colony nicknamed the 'Cinderella of the French Empire' (2007, 3; Brustier 1962), this land-locked country at the heart of the African continent, covering an area that is slightly larger than France and the Benelux states taken together, but only inhabited by an

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<sup>349</sup> I am at unease with the notion of 'structured, focussed comparison'; since it suggests that all variables with exception of the independent variables under examination could be kept constant across the different case studies. Nevertheless, by widening the scope some general claims about French security policy in sub-Saharan Africa become possible. In the end, both case studies serve the purpose of explaining one common phenomenon: French military interventionism in francophone Africa (George and Bennett 2005, 67–70). For a more detailed discussion of this point see the introduction and conclusion to this study.



estimated 4.5 million people, has suffered from continuous political instability and has never escaped the endless spiral of violence and atrocities successive governments and different warring groups inflicted upon each other and the rest of the population. Some pundits define the history of the post-independence CAR as ‘one of the most tragic of the African continent’ (Niewiadowski 2014, 1). The notorious excesses of self-proclaimed Emperor Jean-Bédél Bokassa (1966-1979) exposed only the peak of an iceberg of failed governance and unsuccessful leadership. Given this permanent state of fragility, which induced a semblance of normality, the situation in the CAR has largely failed to attract the deserved attention of the international community (Ngoupandé 2003, 23–24).

Despite ‘the fairly successful democratic transition in the early 1990s’ (Mehler 2011, 118), the country once more fell victim to mismanagement and became the scene of violent conflict shortly afterwards. According to Mehler (2011, 122), the ‘CAR is an example of a transition that was perverted by the undemocratic behavior of democratically elected rulers’. Recent human development indicators show quite plainly the consequences for the population of this ‘perverted transition’. In 2013, the CAR ranked 185/187 on the HDI league table. The life expectancy at birth was with 50.2 years the second lowest in the world. A gross national income per capita of \$588 and 3.5 years of schooling on average reflected the arduousness of daily-life in the CAR.<sup>350</sup> Extreme poverty, a lack of infrastructure, the absence of a functioning state, and an insufficient educational system constituted the breeding ground of recurring mutinies, coups, and rebellions. Finally, a plethora of natural resources (diamonds, gold, game animals, and crude oil in the north) gave rise to disputes over strategic resources thus fuelling the continuous conflicts even further. Due to the country’s constant political instability, the CAR did not benefit from the same generous allocations from the international donor community as Mali. Lastly, the country’s geographic location and its borders with Chad, Sudan, and South Sudan, placed the CAR at the heart of the Darfur crisis, the secession of South Sudan, and the 2006-2008 rebellion in eastern Chad, not to mention the activities of the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) that spilled over to the south east of the country (Berg 2009).<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> UNDP data, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>, accessed on 28 July 2014.

<sup>351</sup> The CAR borders with Chad in the north, Sudan in the northeast, South Sudan in the east, the DRC and Congo Brazzaville in the south, and Cameroon in the west. The borders in the north are anything else but stable and secured. Consequently, the country was directly affected by various regional crises. In particular during the crises

### 5.1.1 Towards the Abyss

With the exception of André-Dieudonné Kolingba, who lost the 1993 democratic elections to Ange-Félix Patassé, all of the country's successive presidents were ousted from office by their political opponents in one way or another.<sup>352</sup> Skirmishes and struggles for leadership defined the last two decades and the presidencies of Félix-Ange Patassé and his successor François Bozizé. Between 1997 and 2008, four peace agreements were signed between the different opposing groups.<sup>353</sup> However, none of these agreements produced a sustainable peace or the long-wanted stability in the CAR. For Mehler (2014), the conflict in the CAR is as much about the mutual distrust among elites created by years of intrigues, mutinies, and politically motivated killings as it is about societal grievances. Adding to this, personal interests usually prevailed over national welfare. As the International Crisis group puts it, all 'armed opposition in the CAR has been driven by [the rebels'] desire to acquire control of the state to advance [their] own personal interest rather than any specific political agenda' (International Crisis Group 2007, 22). Regardless of which movement prevailed at any given moment, without an inclusive national political agenda, the remaining groups were soon antagonised and it thus was only a question of time before the next outburst of violence occurred.

Throughout his term, François Bozizé had failed to address the country's most urgent needs. Besides the government's inability to contribute to economic and social development, Bozizé's biggest mistake was his failure to address the prevailing insecurity and to contain the armed groups that were present in the CAR's territory, in particular in the northeast. Similar to Mali's Amadou Toumani Touré, Bozizé feared that a strong Army could turn against him and thus kept the FACA underequipped and badly

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in Darfur and South Sudan, rebels and refugees crossed the border and carried the conflict into the CAR. The same is true for rebels from Chad, who later constituted a good part of the Seleka movement. In the southeast the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) infiltrated the CAR when retreating from the Ugandan and US military.

<sup>352</sup> David Dacko (1960-1965) overthrown by Jean-Bédél Bokassa; Jean-Bédél Bokassa (1966-1979) overthrown by the French government (Operation Barracuda) and replaced by David Dacko; David Dacko (1979-1981) overthrown by André Kolingba; André Kolingba (1981-1993) electoral defeat in the 1993 elections; Ange-Félix Patassé (1993-2003) deposed by François Bozizé; François Bozizé (2003-2013) ousted by Seleka rebels; Michel Djotodia (2013) after continuous violence forced to resign by regional leaders and the international community; interim President Catherine Samba Panza (2013 - ).

<sup>353</sup> The major peace agreements were signed in Bangui 25 January 1997, Sirte (Libya) 2 February 2007, Birao 13 April 2007, and Libreville (Gabon) 21 June 2008.

trained.<sup>354</sup> His ethno-familial nepotistic governance aggravated the general discontent even further (International Crisis Group 2013, 1–5). Since the end of 2012, the newly created Seleka movement engaged in combats with the FACA and international peacekeepers deployed by the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). In January 2013, Bozizé—aware of the FACA’s inability to resist any major rebellion—and after having solicited France for military support, without effect (*Libération* 2012; Reuters 2012), agreed to the Libreville II negotiations.<sup>355</sup> The resulting Libreville II agreement, in other words, was the president’s last chance to remain in power after having been abandoned by his two major foreign allies—Chad and France—who had supported him during and after his takeover.<sup>356</sup>

The peace treaty ‘aimed to provide a road map for a political transition and ceasefire’ (Mudge and Le Pennec 2013, 29). A government of national unity was to be created under human rights advocate and long-term opposition leader Nicolas Tiangaye. The Seleka was represented by UFDR leader Michel Djotodia as vice prime minister and defence minister (Mehler 2013, 2). The three-year transitional period that was stipulated by the agreement never materialised ‘due to Bozizé’s refusal to engage in a concerted and peaceful transition; failure by ECCAS to monitor the agreement; and Seleka’s tactical advantages on the ground’ (International Crisis Group 2013, i). None of the parties were ready for compromise or interested in a solution that could have saved the country from the exodus. Bozizé was

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<sup>354</sup> Other authors put it more carefully when emphasising the ‘low capacity, the existence of parallel structures in state security services, and the heteroclitite composition of the armed forces’. They interpret Bozizé’s failure to address these shortcomings as a probable lack of political will (Mehler 2012, 57–58).

<sup>355</sup> After the rebels had taken over several major cities in the northeast and the centre of the country, FACA troops together with ECCAS peacekeepers could stop the rebels from entering Bangui and thus created a standstill that allowed for negotiations. Libreville II is not the official name of the concluded peace treaty, but is used in the present study to distinguish this latest peace agreement from the earlier agreement concluded in Libreville in 2008.

<sup>356</sup> In 2011 the Sarkozy administration had revoked the existing bi-lateral defence agreement. The renewal of the existing defence agreement between France and the CAR was part of an overall review of all remaining defence agreements between France and its former colonies. The amended treaty did not contain an assistance clause. In case of an internal or external aggression, France was not anymore obliged to assist the Central African government militarily (République française 2011). Consequently, and in contrast to previous instances such as the interventions of the French Air Force and Foreign Legion against the UFDR in late 2006 and early 2007 provoking negotiations that resulted in the Birao peace agreement in April 2007 (Makong 2013), the Hollande administration was free to refuse Bozizé’s request and to abstain from an intervention in the name of regime stability. With Idriss Déby, Bozizé lost his principal and final regional ally, who not only supported him during the military coup against Félix-Ange Patassé in 2003 but subsequently also secured the former’s stay in power (Debos 2008, 227). Previously, Chadian soldiers formed a major part of Bozizé’s presidential guard (Debos 2008, 228). Chad’s involvement in the CAR, however, runs deeper and is more ambiguous. As of December 2012, signs became visible that Déby had decided to abandon Bozizé. In March 2013, the Chadian administration is believed to directly have supported the military coup. The Déby government is also ‘believed to have been a sponsor and perpetrator of human rights abuses against civilians in CAR’s north’ (Mudge and Le Pennec 2013, 32).

assured by the support South Africa had granted to his government whilst the Seleka did not ignore their own successes during the latest combats. In February 2013, new clashes were witnessed undoing all hopes for a lasting peace. On 24 March the Seleka advanced towards the capital and ousted Bozizé who fled to Cameroon. This move put an end to François Bozizé's decade-old presidential rule, which in its final moments was marked by a 'solitary and paranoid exercise of power' (International Crisis Group 2013, 2).<sup>357</sup> Bozizé's departure, however, was not enough to end the violence.

The CAR was soon engulfed in an even more dangerous crisis. After the departure of Bozizé, Seleka leader Michel Djotodia became president and head of a transitional government. In an attempt to pour oil on troubled water and to reverse the AU's decision to temporarily suspend the CAR, Djotodia pledged to observe the Libreville II accord and to implement the agreed transition (International Crisis Group 2013, 13). Implementing this promise, however, was no mean feat. Soon after his assumption of office, the heterogeneity of the movement came to the forefront. Between March and September 2013, Michel Djotodia increasingly lost control over this 'heterogeneous coalition of Central African and foreign combatants' who, as many observers claimed, had 'nothing in common except being Muslims' (International Crisis Group 2013, 8). By the time Djotodia announced the dissolution of the Seleka, it was already too late for this decision to end the aggravating violence committed by both ex-Seleka fighters and anti-balaka militia.<sup>358</sup> The CAR was in shambles and even the slightest reference to statehood would have euphemised the reality on the ground. A state of anarchy had engulfed the entire country, undoing the little that was left of the weak institutional setting.

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<sup>357</sup> François Bozizé's had seized power in 2003 after ousting Ange-Félix Patassé from office. After an initial period of reconciliation, Bozizé soon found himself in the midst of the so-called Bush War (2004-2007), which opposed government forces and various rebel groups (notably Michel Djotodia's UFDR). Despite the signing of the Sirte peace agreement on 2 February 2007 between the government and the FDPC and the Birao peace agreement on 13 April 2007 between the government and the UFDR, which officially put an end to the conflict, the hostilities continued giving rise to the more inclusive Libreville peace agreement 2008. However, occasional outbreaks of violence and disputes over the control of diamond fields in the north continued well into 2011. The 2012 Seleka rebellion constituted a restart of the same conflict.

<sup>358</sup> The violence committed by anti-balaka elements reached its heights at the beginning of 2014 after the resignation of Michel Djotodia and despite the presence of African and French peacekeepers, see (*Human Rights Watch* 2014).

### 5.1.2 The Role of Religion: Fact or Fiction?

What had begun as a conflict between rebels of mainly northern origin and government forces loyal to then President François Bozizé quickly turned into a full-blown civil war that gained an increasingly sectarian dimension. Even for a country accustomed to political crises, authoritarianism, and mutinies, this was something new. Whilst not being a religious movement per se, the Seleka used references to their Muslim identity as the common denominator to unite the different factions and groups comprising the movement (Flichy, Mézin-Bourginaud, and Mathias 2014, 50). Islam soon became the principal identity-forging element of this rebel alliance. Religion was likewise a means of emphasising the marginalisation, underrepresentation, and neglect of the northerners, especially those living in the remote Vakaga province, who constituted the majority of the Seleka's recruits.<sup>359</sup> Based on these observations and the fact that Michel Djotodia was the country's first Muslim president,<sup>360</sup> the news of the civil war in the CAR being a religiously motivated conflict between Muslims and Christians spread like wildfire (Bensimon and Guibert 2013).

However, religious identity only added to the divisions already existing between populations, which were rooted in geographic, ethnic, linguistic, and social cleavages (Mayneri 2014, 189; Burchard 2014). In other words, the sectarian divide between Seleka (mainly Muslims) and anti-balaka (mainly Christians) militias, with reference to which many pundits analysed the conflict, layered upon a much older ethno-regional cleavage between the north and the south (Mehler 2011, 119). In the discourses of leading rebel figures, social grievances became intertwined with religious claims. For instance Abakar Sabone co-founder of the UFDR, the strongest of all factions comprising Seleka, claimed a more equitable representation of the nation's different ethnic groups, denounced well-known grievances such as 'the impassibility of the roads in the [Vakaga (northern CAR)] region..., the lack of health care, the

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<sup>359</sup> The Vakaga province, bordering on Chad, Sudan, and South Sudan and thus being particularly exposed to the conflicts that have afflicted the region, had been completely abandoned by the central government. Most people living in this region feel closer to N'Djamena and Khartoum than to Bangui. Many speak Arabic instead of Sango or French. The populace of the Vakaga region also accounts for the largest number of the CAR's Muslim minority. Other recruits reportedly originated from southern Chad and Sudan reinforcing the perception among southerners that the Seleka is a foreign movement that invaded their country.

<sup>360</sup> This definition does not consider Emperor Jean-Bédél Bokassa's politically motivated conversion to Islam. In order to please Libya's Gaddafi he and his Prime Minister Patassé converted to the Muslim faith for two months (Flichy, Mézin-Bourginaud, and Mathias 2014, 44).

lack of education, and insufficient access to potable water’, and at the same time criticised Bozizé’s ‘broken promise to appoint a Muslim prime minister’ (Mehler 2011, 131–32). Religion, in other words, was exploited in order to find support for a cause that would be better explained in terms of geopolitical motivations and societal grievances. Oftentimes, the actors on the ground identified religion with indigenism. Put differently, religion was also used to define the “Self” of the respective groups and to distinguish it from the “Other”, the foreign. For many anti-balaka members, Seleka fighters were foreigners that had invaded their country (Mayneri 2014, 191).

Finally, explanations of the conflict as a religious war between Christians and Muslims become untenable when one looks closer at the many different shapes of the various religious identities (Mayneri 2014, 191). As former Central African Prime Minister Jean-Paul Ngoupandé notes on the specifics of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa,

‘[Over] a period of one thousand years, Islam became integrated in everyday life, adjusted to the African traditions, which it digested and incorporated. It took on a specific African shape, having succeeded in creating a synthesis between itself and many pre-Islamic religions. This is the key to understanding the tolerant, noble, and even friendly character of the negro-African Islam. Only its [African version of] monotheism gets along well with animism.<sup>361</sup> (Ngoupandé 2003, 81)

Neither the Seleka nor the anti-balaka nor the CAR’s populace in general practice Christianity or Islam in a traditional sense. Most people mix animist practices with one of the above-mentioned monotheistic beliefs. The anti-balaka movement, for instance, often described as Christian militia, is composed of members of Christian, Muslim, and Fulani (Peuls) communities. Beyond their nominal belonging to one of these communities most of them are animist, a trait that can be easily grasped by noting their wearing of so-called *gris-gris*—charms that are supposed to protect the bearer against enemy fire when going into battle (Chapleau 2014a; Assemblée Nationale 2014c). Notwithstanding this cautious qualification of the crisis’s religious dimension, the conflict has forged cleavages within the country that can easily be summarised along religious lines of demarcation. A report by the International Crisis Group from June 2013, describes the new political situation in the CAR as follows,

The political, geo-ethnic and religious balance within the country’s leadership has been shaken up, provoking fears and confusion in CAR and in neighbouring countries. The military aircraft transporting the Seleka’s wounded flew to Khartoum and Rabat, the visit made by Central African

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<sup>361</sup> The attention here lies on the blending of monotheism and animism not on the normative evaluation of a certain form of religious practices, which is open to debate.

leaders to Qatar and the concerns expressed by neighbours (South Sudan, Uganda, Congo-Brazzaville) about the rise of religious fundamentalism have created a climate of suspicion and dangerous religious tensions within the country and region. (International Crisis Group 2013, 18)

These tensions expressed themselves in form of lootings, atrocities, and what some characterised as *pre-genocidal*<sup>362</sup> clashes. In the end, the violent confrontation between uncontrolled ex-Seleka units and the anti-balaka militias were driven more by hate vis-à-vis those who caused them hardship and by the sentiment of revenge than by any religious ideology. In this regard, the situation in the CAR is incomparable with the ideology advanced by fundamentalist fighters in Mali. References to radical Islam thus need to be considered as political arguments that were first used by the Bozizé administration to stigmatise the rebels and to win the international community's support for its fight against rebel forces. Later this argument was willingly picked up by international actors to bring the conflict in line with the 21<sup>st</sup> century's most popular security narrative, global Islamist terrorism.

### 5.1.3 The French Army in the CAR

The French state and its Army look back on a long history of deep involvement in the CAR's domestic politics. As Faes and Smith (2000) show, the CAR before and after its independence 'was the "hub" of the French *pre-positioned* forces on the continent' (Faes and Smith 2000).<sup>363</sup> Every time French interests

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<sup>362</sup> The notion of genocide has been subject to much debate. In particular, the question of at what stage one may start speaking of genocide remains unclear. The International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia advanced the following definition of genocide: 'Genocide is characterised by two legal ingredients according to the terms of Article 4 of the Statute: [1] the material element of the offence, constituted by one or several acts enumerated in paragraph 2 of Article 4; [2] the mens rea of the offence, consisting of the special intent to destroy, *in whole or in part*, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.' However, this does not solve the question of threshold. '*In part*' as some authors have recognised could refer to 'the murder of a single person' (McGill Faculty of Law 2007). The broader consensus, however, is that genocide refers to 'the promotion and execution of policies by a state or its agents which result in the deaths of a substantial portion of a group ... [and when] the victimized groups are defined primarily in terms of their communal characteristics, i.e., ethnicity, religion or nationality' (Harff and Gurr 1988, 360). This definition, however, does not overcome the problem that in the case of the CAR one can hardly speak of the state as the perpetrator of the systematic killings. French actors referred repeatedly to the notion of genocide or genocide in the making. But as much as they used the notion they put its meaning and applicability into question both with regards to the extent of the killings and its perpetrator creating much confusion around the notion.

<sup>363</sup> This section focuses primarily on the French Army's involvement in the CAR's domestic politics. Another role the CAR played for the French military in Africa should however not be forgotten. Since independence French troops have used Bangui as a rear base for more than thirty operations on the African continent. Broader strategic considerations are thus likely to have influenced the decision-making process as well (see paragraph on geographic proximity, Ngoupandé 1997, 256).

were concerned, Paris, according to the same authors, ‘amputated’ the country’s sovereignty. This, however, would not have been possible without the consent of the CAR’s ruling elites, who willingly entrusted their own security to the French Army.

The CAR’s first president, David Dacko, who came to power thanks to his family ties with the defunct spiritual leader of the CAR’s decolonisation process and subsequently installed an autocratic and kleptocratic regime received the former coloniser’s full support (Bigo 1988, 42-48). His successor, Jean-Bédél Bokassa, had to work harder to win the sympathy of his French counterparts Charles de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou, but could count on *Monsieur Afrique* Jacques Foccart and President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, aficionado of big game hunting. As in most parts of francophone Africa, regime-stability was the ultimate ambition of France’s policy towards the CAR until the turn of the millennium (Koepf 2013b). However, France did not only support dubious regimes, but in several instances provoked regime changes by deploying troops to the CAR (see appendix 2). Thus, the defence agreement concluded in the 1960s (loi n°6-1225; décret n°60-1230), was not an automatic life insurance for the Central African elites in power (Mehler 2014). Once the self-proclaimed Emperor Bokassa had become too compromising, Giscard d’Estaing ordered Operation Barracuda to overthrow Bokassa on 20 September 1979 and to put David Dacko back in power. Dacko’s regime, however, was too weak to survive without France’s financial and military support. France increased its development assistance to the CAR, installed French political advisors in all strategic positions of the Central African state, and reoccupied the former French military base at Bouar (International Crisis Group 2007, 6–7). This policy soon came to be known as the “Barracuda syndrome” (Ngoupandé 1997), which signifies ‘the infantilisation of a people that were so dispossessed of their own history that they were not even responsible for deposing their own tyrant’ (International Crisis Group 2007, 6). Exemplary of this tutelage was the role of Jean-Claude Manton, lieutenant colonel in the French Secret Services. Manton first acted as the protector of David Dacko and later of his successor André Kolingba and soon became one of the most powerful persons in the country, acting as a veritable proconsul to the CAR (Malagardis 2013). In no other African country French actors were as deeply involved in the domestic political life as in the allegedly sovereign CAR (Faes and Smith 2000). After an attempted coup by future Presidents Ange-Félix Patassé and François Bozizé, France’s paternalist way of dealing with this crisis negated the



last bit of sovereignty this young state had once enjoyed. When dealing with the unsuccessful coup-leader Patassé, it was the French ambassador and Jean-Claude Manton representing the Kolingba government who decided on Patassé's fate. As the International Crisis Group put it ironically, 'France reached an agreement with itself to provide safe conduct to Patassé' (International Crisis Group 2007, 8).

After the election of Ange-Félix Patassé a series of mutinies characterised the country's political landscape throughout the 1990s. In reaction to these recurrent outbreaks of violence the French Army 'patrolled Bangui to protect foreign nationals' (International Crisis Group 2007, 10). Subsequently, French troops were repeatedly involved in 'short, intense, and unpredictable operations' (Saint Victor 2013, 6). Operations Almandin I, II, and III were France's response to the three succeeding mutinies that distressed the CAR between 1996 and 1997. The new degree of violence implicated the French government deeply in the CAR's domestic politics. After the death of two French soldiers in January 1997 and the retaliation by French forces that caused several civilian casualties, Lionel Jospin, one of the core players of the normalisation process of France's Africa policy from 1997 to 2002, publicly criticised the French military operation and demanded to put an end to the opaque decision-making that had governed France's relations with the African continent up to this date (Jospin 1997). This and subsequent statements of the same kind while breaking with traditional 'consensus observed by French politicians with regard to military operations in Africa' (International Crisis Group 2007, 10) did not stop France's military interventionism.<sup>364</sup> However, they revealed a shift in the ideational framework that had defined French decision-making. Up until the beginning of the normalisation process in 1994, French actors considered it normal that the French state bore a helping hand in one of its former colonies. In light of the advancing European integration following the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, structural changes in the post-Cold War international system, the genocide in Rwanda and the actors' efforts to

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<sup>364</sup> Operation Cigogne, which started in 1997 and oversaw a coordinated troop reduction, was the most visible expression of the French foreign policy elite's intention to end the more than a century long French military presence in the CAR (International Crisis Group 2007, 12). In 1998 this objective seemed to have been achieved with all but 200 French troops, which had been integrated into the MISAB, returning to France. When François Bozizé launched his successful coup against the Patassé regime in March 2003, France did not intervene on the side of the Patassé government and thus indirectly supported Bozizé together with Chad, which provided soldiers, weapons, and other logistics, the rebel movement around Bozizé. Once the new regime took office in Bangui, Paris sent 300 soldiers in support of the FOMUC/MICOPAX and to protect French expatriates as well as other foreign nationals (Operation Boali). After having been away for four years, the French Army was back in the CAR (2007, 16).

redress and adapt their policies to these changes, this ideational framework gradually crumbled away.<sup>365</sup> New influences and orientations began to shape the decision-makers' mental maps while the remnants of the past were still present. These reconsiderations led to the professionalization of the French Army and a reduction of the total number of troops.

Explaining France's reaction to the 1996-1997 mutinies, Faes and Smith (2000) compare the situation the Chirac government faced at the time to a Cornelian dilemma. A non-intervention would have helped undemocratic rebels take over with the prospect of long-term instability, while an intervention perpetuated the image of imperial interference, which was in stark contrast to the process of normalisation. This is also what happened a decade later when French paratroopers in 2007, in a mission that reminded the famous battle of Kolwezi in 1978, secured the city of Birao. This last minute military operation undermined the UFDR's attack and led to the signing of a peace agreement between the rebels and the Bozizé administration. But it also provoked heavy criticism against France's supposed neo-colonial approach towards the region. Since then the French Army has remained on alert in the CAR. Interviews conducted by the International Crisis Group in the aftermath of the redeployment of French troops in 2007 clearly demonstrate that the government already expected to have to intervene again in the near future. 'Return tickets', according to one diplomat, 'would prove infinitely more expensive than remaining to prevent the total collapse of the state' (2007, 21).

## 5.2 The French Decision-Making Process

The context described above reflected the operational environment Hollande and his administration were facing when they came to power and took the decision to launch Operation Sangaris on 5 December 2013, one and a half years later. Once more a French government had to choose between either sitting on the fence and observing what some top representatives labelled a *genocide in the making* (Araud 2013c; Fabius 2013r) or taking action that involved considerable costs and could only happen at the risk of France being criticised for its neo-colonial approach and interference in a sovereign state's domestic

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<sup>365</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the normalisation process, see Chapter 2. See also (Chafer 2002; Banégas and Marchal 2013)

affairs. As Wheeler argues, this is the core dilemma actors face when intervening or claiming to intervene in the name of humanitarian principles, since ““doing something” to rescue non-citizens facing the extreme is likely to provoke the charge of interference in the internal affairs of another state, while “doing nothing” can lead to accusations of moral indifference’ (Wheeler 2002, 1). By looking closely at the decision-making process that led to Operation Sangaris, the remainder of the chapter probes concepts, motives, and justifications that help to understand how French policy-makers solved this dilemma. More precisely, I ask why French actors were willing to digress for a second time within one year from their repeated manifest to put an end to France’s role as Africa’s *gendarme*.

As in the previous chapter, I first probe the emergence of the Central African crisis on the French security agenda and explain why the intervention had not occurred earlier, despite the deteriorating situation in December 2012 and the subsequent putsch in March 2013. The explanatory factors that are advanced relate to the parallel occurrence of the military operation in Mali and different degrees of perceived proximity. The next section engages with the policy framing phase and explains how French decision-makers became increasingly convinced that intervention was needed. It also shows how actors were torn between the idea of framing the intervention in humanitarian terms and the attempt to portray it as yet another instance in the GWoT. The final section concentrates on the decision and the justifications and motivations that surrounded it. This section first shows how and why French actors played down the importance of this operation. By concentrating on the notions of empathy and responsibility it also explores two motivations that are part of French actors’ self-identity and which eventually were decisive for the launch of Operation Sangaris.

### 5.2.1 In the Shadows of Serval: The Inclusion of the Central African Crisis on France’s Security Agenda

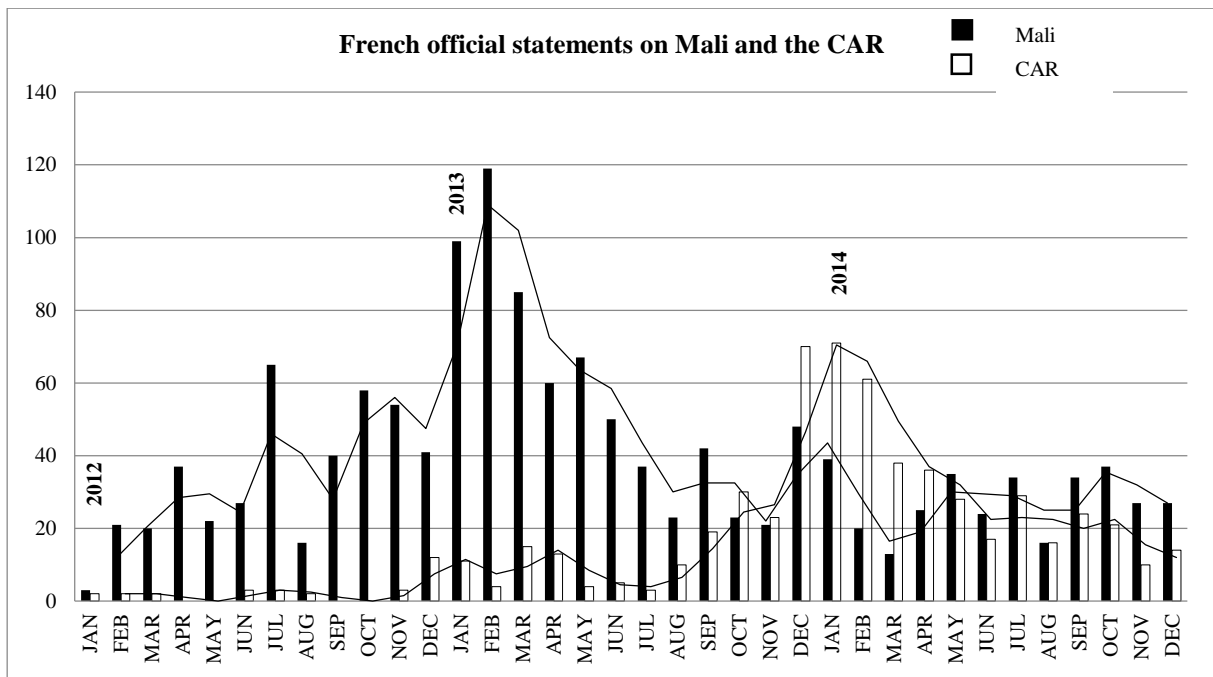
For the past ten years, French officials had described and interpreted the situation in the CAR mostly as part of a larger regional mosaic. Instability, political volatility, and conflicts were attributed to Central Africa rather than to the Central African Republic. Several factors reinforced the French actors’ understanding of the situation in the CAR as a regional dysfunction. The rebellion in eastern Chad, the

presence of a European peacekeeping force (EUFOR Chad/CAR) both in Chad and the north-eastern CAR, the conflicts in South Sudan and Darfur, and the porous borders that allowed refugees and rebels from neighbouring countries to enter and exit the territory of the CAR mostly uncontrolled were all part of the same regional operational environment (Lacroix 2009; Bertoux 2012). By the mid-2000s the LRA shifted its base of operations to eastern DRC and from there ‘launched attacks and raids into the Central African Republic’ and thus further reinforced the perceived need for a regional approach (Enough Project n.d.; Gettleman 2012). Only in 2012 did French actors begin to consider the instability in the CAR as a discrete issue on their security agenda. The increasing number of reported clashes between government forces and Seleka rebels, the attacks on government buildings and the French embassy in December 2012, and the putsch against Bozizé in March 2013 caused growing concern among the Hollande administration. At the same time none of these events was considered as sufficiently serious to put the Central African crisis at the top of France’s national security agenda. The concurrence of the two crises had as an effect that French foreign policy-makers never attached the same importance to the situation in the CAR as to the one in Mali. A comparison of the French government’s respective discursive output during the crises in Mali and the CAR shows that the former took priority over the latter on France’s national security agenda. Between January 2012 and December 2014, the Sarkozy<sup>366</sup> and Hollande administrations produced and registered a total of 1,409 official foreign policy statements that contained the word *Mali*, but only 601 statements that mentioned the word *Centrafrique* or one of its derivatives.<sup>367</sup> Except for the period between December 2013 and April 2014, that is, at the height of Operation Sangaris, the number of statements issued monthly dealing with Mali always exceeded those issued on the CAR (see fig. 10).

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<sup>366</sup> January – May 2012.

<sup>367</sup> This finding is based on a word count analysis of the Basedoc database maintained by the French Foreign Ministry. The search was conducted for the three French denominations of the term Central African Republic: *Centrafrique*, *République Centrafricaine*, and *RCA*, <http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/exl-php/cadcgp.php>, accessed on 2 September 2014.



**Figure 10. Timeline of official French foreign policy statements**

Source: own elaboration, based on data extracted from <http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/exl-php/cadcgp.php>, accessed on 2 September 2014

In retrospect, one could argue that it is not surprising that Operation Serval stirred a more intensive discursive activity than Operation Sangaris, given its relatively larger size. However, the total number of troops deployed during the two operations is a consequence of the respective decision-making processes and not their cause. Instead, the crucial variable remains the cognitive processing of the perceived information. Thus, an explanation as to why the two operations enjoyed such different degrees of priority on the French security agenda needs to consider factors other than merely the total number of troops deployed.

Differences in the perceptions of the respective operational environments in Mali and the CAR are advanced as the primary *explanantia* of the two policy outcomes. Although the crisis in the CAR was framed under the broader category of “crisis situation in francophone Africa”, which facilitated the emergence of the conflict as a priority on France’s security agenda in the first place, it was understood primarily as an indirect threat to France’s national security. This difference in perception is closely related to the fact that Operation Serval directly responded to the narrative of the GWoT, whilst Operation Sangaris—despite the actors’ attempts to bring the crisis in the CAR in line with the GWoT narrative—was mainly justified and justifiable on humanitarian grounds. In general, the GWoT narrative appealing to the national security of the intervening country facilitates the mobilisation of decision-

makers to resort to military force.<sup>368</sup> However, the principal difference between the two cases lies in the fact that Sangaris was not perceived as an intervention *stricto sensu*, but primarily as a reinforcement of those French forces that were already deployed to the country (*forces prépositionnées*).<sup>369</sup> By the time the Seleka ousted President Bozizé in March 2013 the French forces already exceeded 500 troops. Consequently, when Hollande gave the order to launch Operation Sangaris in December 2013 this decision was at least at a discursive level in perfect continuity with the earlier troop reinforcement and could be framed as a response to the changing situation on the ground.<sup>370</sup> The president, when announcing his decision, emphasised this continuity by saying, ‘there are already 600 French troops on site. This number will be doubled within the coming days if not within the next hours’ (Hollande 2013k).<sup>371</sup> Troop reinforcement, being a more technocratic and organisational question and less politicised than a full-fledged intervention, quite naturally led to a less important discursive output. Moreover, the fact that French troops had already been present in the country before the CAR became a priority on the French security agenda ensured that the intervention itself never reached the same exceptional character as Operation Serval. While French decision-makers remained vague about what their country’s exact role in the conflict resolution might be, they did not categorically reject the possibility of active French military involvement.

Adding to this, in the case of Mali, France’s intervention, as we saw in the preceding chapter, was not governed by any UN resolution but was the Hollande administration’s reaction to Dioncounda

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<sup>368</sup> Humanitarian crises are primarily linked to misery and backwardness in faraway places and only indirectly affect the intervening state’s national security. For a more detailed discussion on the power and limits of the securitisation of the GWoT narrative since 9/11 see Buzan (2006).

<sup>369</sup> The Hollande administration, in the wake of the December 2012 uprisings and again after the putsch in March 2013, decided to reinforce the French military presence in Bangui. After the UN Security Council had voted Resolution 2127 on 5 December, France deployed a 1,600-strong peacekeeping force (subsequently reinforced to reach a strength of 2,000 troops)—Operation Sangaris—in support of the ECCAS-led MICOPAX. Previously, France had maintained a contingent of approximately 300 troops under the framework of Operation Boali. Operation Boali was originally established to support the two African-led peacekeeping missions FOMUC (*Force Multinationale en Centrafrique*) and MICOPAX. From 2008 to 2013 MICOPAX had been mandated to protect civilians, secure the territory, and facilitate the political dialogue. Having succeeded the *Force Multinationale en Centrafrique* (FOMUC) established on 25 October 2002 by the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC), on 19 December 2013 the ECCAS-led MICOPAX had transformed into the African-led MISCA. Both missions received considerable logistical, technical, and financial support by France (and the EU with regards to financial support) (Meyer 2011, 20–24).

<sup>370</sup> The mandate of Operation Sangaris was different from the mandate of Operation Boali. In particular, French troops were granted greater liberties in the use of force.

<sup>371</sup> ‘Déjà 600 militaires français sont sur place. Cet effectif sera doublé d’ici quelques jours, pour ne pas dire quelques heures’.

Traoré's request for military assistance. In contrast, Operation Sangaris was voted on by the UN Security Council. UN Resolution 2127 explicitly '*authorizes* the French forces in the CAR, within the limits of their capacities and areas of deployment, and for a temporary period, to take all necessary measures to support MISCA in the discharge of its mandate' (UN Security Council 2013, §50).

Taken together, these factors made that the crisis in the CAR was perceived and framed as a minor risk to France's national security. Most importantly, and in contrast to what the official discourse after the launch of the operation suggested, intervention was by far not the only viable option during the decision-making process. Notwithstanding the teleological interpretations of the gradual reinforcement of French troops in the CAR during the year 2013, the decision-making process that eventually led to the launch of Operation Sangaris was not linear and military intervention was not a foregone conclusion; at least not until September 2013. Moreover, the perceived proximity, which was one of the main driving forces behind the launch of Operation Serval, was less pronounced in the case of the CAR making it more difficult for French actors to overcome prevailing doubts and uncertainty during the decision-making process. Instead, reluctance dominated the French actors' cognitive maps up until the point at which concerns about the humanitarian situation and the risk of genocide appealed to the actors' self-understanding as representatives of an influential power that had to honour its obligations and thus were able to dispel prevailing doubts.

### ***The Hollande Administration's Reluctance to Intervene***

In June 2012 the Hollande administration began to consider the situation in the CAR to be an idiosyncratic crisis deserving France's full attention (Conway-Mouret 2012). The recognition and labelling of the developments in the CAR as symptoms of a crisis, however, did not immediately lead French actors to conclude that military intervention was necessary; this was quite novel given the frequency of French military interventions in this country (see appendix 3). France's reluctance to intervene in the Central African crisis, provoked civil commotion in the capital, notably after a new offensive by Seleka forces in early December 2012 that brought them in control of large parts of the country. Protesters in the capital vigorously denounced France's passivity. After having gathered in front of the US embassy, the protest march directed itself towards the French embassy and several

hundred protesters fired life ammunition against the embassy's facilities on 26 December 2012.

These outbreaks of violence are epiphenomenal of the extremely ambiguous relationship between the two countries, as the justifications advanced by the protesters clearly show: 'We are here at the French embassy, because France colonised us. But France also tends to abandon us. We don't need France anymore, France should take its embassy and leave' (*Huffington Post* 2012).<sup>372</sup> Former Prime Minister Jean-Paul Ngoupandé in his critique of the self-victimisation of the Central African population explained the difficulty successive French governments were facing as follows:

Thirty-seven years after independence, it [the CAR] does not cease infantilising itself, that is, regressing in the psychoanalytical sense of the term. No other former French colony in sub-Saharan Africa maintains as unhealthy and irrational relations with the ex-coloniser [as the CAR]. Everything operates on the level of "I love you, neither do I"<sup>373</sup>.... [The CAR] is also the country of the worst anti-French verbal excesses when one party or group of parties feels abandoned' (Ngoupandé 1997, 39).

As the protests in Bangui from December 2012 show, two decades later Ngoupandé's analysis of the Central Africans attitude vis-à-vis the former coloniser remained valid. In a highly sensitive context where almost any action could provoke uncontrollable and unwanted reactions, French actors had to demonstrate a particular tactfulness in producing a narrative that would be interpreted in the way its authors intended and lead to policies that would not repeat the case of Côte d'Ivoire, where French troops found themselves between the opposing camps and were accused by both sides of supporting the respective other (McGovern 2011).

For the time being, the French government declared that it was 'preoccupied' by the recent outbreaks of violence and condemned the rebels and their attack on Mali's internal sovereignty. The Hollande administration's priority at that point became the security of its diplomatic staff as well as the safety of the around 1,200 French expatriates and Central Africans of double nationality living and working in the CAR, mainly in Bangui (Élysée 2012a; Élysée 2012b). In response to the attack, President Hollande ordered the defence minister to increase France's military presence (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2012f). Yet, following François Bozizé's appeal to France for military assistance in the fight against the

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<sup>372</sup> *'Nous sommes ici à l'ambassade de France, parce que c'est la France qui nous a colonisés. Mais la France a tendance à nous lâcher. On n'a plus besoin de la France, la France n'a qu'à prendre son ambassade et partir'*.

<sup>373</sup> In French, « Je t'aime, moi non plus » refers to the infamous love song written by Serge Gainsbourg and performed by himself together first with Brigitte Bardot and later Jane Birkin. Ngoupandé uses this reference to emphasise the notoriously ambiguous relationship Central Africans maintain with their former coloniser.



rebel movement, Hollande responded that France would not protect any regime against an advancing rebellion but simply protect French interests and citizens (*Francetvinfo* 2012).

By the time the Seleka ousted François Bozizé from office in March 2013 and replaced him with the self-appointed leader Michel Djotodia, 560 French troops were present in the country to assure the safety of ‘French expatriates or expatriates from other nations that enjoy [France’s] protection’ (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2013d). Despite this non-negligible military presence, and irrespective of Bozizé’s formal request for military assistance prior to the putsch, French troops did not directly interfere in order to stop the dissolution of the Central African state. Referring to the reform of the existing defence agreement in 2010, which obliges France to intervene only in the case of an external aggression, the French government did not feel obliged to act. It thus refrained from providing definitive military support to the Central African government that could have saved the regime from collapsing and re-established much needed stability. The concept of regime stability that could have been brought forward during those early stages of the crisis had become obsolete and thus did not emerge as a motivation in the French political discourse (Koepf 2013b).

In addition to the waning of the concept of regime stability as a motivation and legitimate justification of French interventionism, there are other case-specific reasons that explain the decision to stall an intervention in favour of the Bozizé regime in January 2013. First, backing François Bozizé would have implied that the French government was ready to rescue an undemocratic and increasingly unpopular leader. This practice, while accepted in the past, stood in contrast to France’s commitments to a renewed security policy towards the African continent. Since the beginning of its term, the Hollande administration showed itself committed to putting an end to France’s neo-colonial approach and traditional military interventionism (Mélonio 2011). Representatives of the Hollande government produced a new discourse on Africa that should be ‘realistic, normalised, and encompassing the entire continent’ (Le Gal 2014). The CAR, as the site where France had interfered more often and directly than in any other of its former colonies, was a symbol that could either strengthen the established discourse or destroy it. Supporting the incumbent regime in its struggle for survival not only would have been in contradiction with the reformed defence agreement but also would have been a strong reminder of France’s past involvement in Africa and would have put the three pillars of the renewed discourse into

question. The debate that preoccupied French decision-makers at that time centred on the questions of credibility and coherence. Both were at risk to be undermined should the president decide to help his Central African counterpart. In January 2013, the Hollande administration decided to remain in line with its earlier political commitments.<sup>374</sup> An intervention was judged to be too risky by Hollande and his cabinet, who had not forgotten that France's involvement in the CAR's domestic politics already had cost one former French president the re-election and provoked a severe debate on France's role and legitimacy in Africa throughout the 1990s, which damaged France's reputation considerably (Ngoupandé 1997, 6). As Notin (2014, 42) remarks with regard to France increasing absenteeism, 'with the omnipresence of the media policy-makers are no longer inclined to take additional risks abroad when they have to confront so many at home'. This decision, however, was more than merely a strategic move on the part of the Hollande administration. The colonial and neo-colonial past was understood as the antipode of present-day French security policy in Africa. Having been central to the Socialist discourse already prior to Hollande's election as president, it had obtained the status of an identity forging element. French actors had begun to see themselves as advocates of this renewed discourse. Accordingly, the past became the "Other" in comparison and opposition to which the present "Self" defined itself. Hence, undermining the discourse of normalisation would also have challenged the actors' self-perception.

Consequently, the French government initially refused to commit to more than a reinforcement of the French troops on site whose mandate primarily consisted of protecting foreign nationals in and around Bangui. However, for those pundits who interpreted the French troop reinforcement as indirect support for the Bozizé regime the government's reluctant stance remained a sign of neo-colonial continuity. The Hollande administration, despite its reservation to intervene, had to defend itself against accusations portraying France as the protector of the Bozizé regime. On the question as to whether or not additional troops would be brought in to save a defeated president and his regime, Fabius retorted, 'No, not at all. François Hollande said it clearly; we do not have to interfere in the domestic affairs of the CAR. However, we need to protect our citizens. This is what we are doing' (Fabius 2013e).<sup>375</sup> Despite these affirmations, doubts persisted among different recipients of the French discourse, in

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<sup>374</sup> Vincent Desportes, general in the French Army, interview by author, Paris, 12 January 2014.

<sup>375</sup> 'Non, pas du tout. François Hollande l'a dit fort bien, nous n'avons pas à nous mêler aux affaires intérieures de la Centrafrique. En revanche, nous devons protéger nos ressortissants. C'est ce que nous faisons'.

particular among parts of the domestic audience. These doubts pushed members of the Hollande administration to become even fiercer advocates of the still fragile narrative of normalisation. The doctrine of non-interference into a state's domestic affairs prevailed over all other arguments until the second half of 2013. The question remained topical even months after Bozizé had been ousted and Operation Sangaris launched. Quizzed by the Parliamentary Committee for Foreign Affairs in December 2013, Fabius had to repeat the government's reasoning: 'M. Candelier [French MP for the Communist party], nonetheless, is right to highlight the necessity of putting an end to these interferences. Several speakers were surprised that France did not support Mr Bozizé. In this respect, I would like to reaffirm our principled stand: France does not, *or not anymore*, give support to this or that government; it supports the Africans' (Assemblée Nationale 2013e, emphasis added).<sup>376</sup> The fact that the French government was criticised for supporting Bozizé even without having committed any significant numbers of troops to the country showed French actors quite plainly the difficulties they would have to expect should they decide to take a more pronounced stance in the Central African crisis. The following exchange between former Delegate Minister in charge of French citizens living abroad Hélène Conway-Mouret (2013) and a French journalist demonstrates the dilemma situation in which the Socialist government had found itself, after having been criticised for both supporting Bozizé and abandoning him at the same time:

Q: ...At the moment we are witnessing a crisis in the Central African Republic, with rebels at the gates of Bangui, the country's capital. There is no question of intervening, said François Hollande. Can we interpret this as a desertion of François Bozizé?

A: No, not at all. Simply that France cannot intervene in an independent country.

Q: It already did so in the past!

A: All this is part of the past.

Q: These times have passed?

A: Absolutely. Of course, we have interests that we protect, we have French expatriates for whom we are responsible and should the security situation be changing, we will certainly be present to evacuate our expatriates, but today this is not an issue.<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> 'M. Candelier a cependant raison de souligner la nécessité de mettre un terme aux ingérences. Plusieurs orateurs se sont étonnés que la France n'ait pas soutenu M. Bozizé. Je veux à cet égard réaffirmer une position de principe : la France ne soutient pas, ou plus, tel ou tel gouvernement ; elle soutient les Africains'.

<sup>377</sup> 'Q - Passons au chapitre international. En ce moment, il y a une crise en République centrafricaine avec cette offensive des rebelles qui sont aux portes de Bangui, la capitale centrafricaine. Il n'est pas question d'intervenir, a dit François Hollande. Peut-on interpréter cette position comme un lâchage de François Bozizé ?

R - Mais pas du tout. Simplement, la France n'a pas à intervenir dans un pays indépendant.

Q - Elle l'a déjà fait !

R - Tout cela fait partie du passé.

Q - Ce temps est donc révolu ?

This episode from early 2013 constitutes an important element for the understanding of French actors' altered approach to Africa. The fact that the official discourse of rupture was actually accompanied by deeds is suggestive at least of the co-existence of several competing mental frames that French actors would rely on when facing a new crisis situation that in the past would automatically have provoked a military response; if not of the end of the traditional policy towards Africa. The decision to abandon Bozizé was far from being self-evident, particularly given the criticism it then provoked from those parts of society who expected French intervention in the name of stability.

Second, the first call for assistance reached Paris at the very moment Hollande had given a green light to Operation Serval and the deployment of 5,000 troops. A positive response to Bozizé's request for military assistance at that time would have brought the French Army to its operational and logistical limits. This concern was shared with the Defence Ministry and the military that, for strategic reasons, were usually more inclined towards an early intervention than the rest of the Hollande administration (Assemblée Nationale 2014d). The French military, without overstretching its own capacities, can deploy around 6,000 to 7,000 combat troops anywhere around the world on a permanent basis and renew these forces periodically at any one time. With 5,000 troops already deployed in Mali, and without the least certainty regarding the outcome and the duration of this operation, a second operation in the CAR would have constituted an elevated risk for French forces.<sup>378</sup> In February 2013, that is only one month into the operation in Mali, policy-makers began to call for the reduction of the troops deployed.<sup>379</sup> This strategy of reducing the number of troops as quickly as possible aimed not only at avoiding the impression of France re-occupying one of its former colonies, but also sought to liberate troops who could later be deployed to the CAR. With the intervention in Mali at its heights, it was both strategically unthinkable and politically impossible to launch a second operation at the time of Djotodia's putsch.<sup>380</sup> Operation Serval first needed to show some success before the government could engage French troops

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*R - Absolument. Nous avons bien sûr des intérêts que nous protégeons, nous avons des ressortissants français dont nous sommes responsables et s'il devait y avoir une situation sécuritaire qui devait changer, nous serons bien sûr présents pour évacuer nos ressortissants mais aujourd'hui, ce n'est pas d'actualité'.*

<sup>378</sup> As Vincent Desportes highlights during an interview, France can deploy a total of 70,000 combat troops; however, only once. On a permanent basis the White Book on Defence recommends a deployment of not more than 6,000 to 7,000 periodically renewable troops.

<sup>379</sup> This opinion was not shared by the military who considered such announcements as counter-productive to their mission. In the end, the promised retreat took longer than initially announced.

<sup>380</sup> Vincent Desportes, general in the French Army, interview by author, Paris, 12 January 2014.

in a second mission on the African continent. Eventually, a significant reduction of the operational forces was not achieved before the end of 2013. The French military were reticent to intervene in the CAR for yet another reason. The nature of the conflict in the CAR demanded a policing operation and made the clear identification of an enemy impossible. Military forces tend to dislike such policing missions because they cannot be ended through victory. In addition, these missions require the intervening forces to operate among civilians thus increasing the risk of collateral damage and exposing the soldiers to attacks by a non-identifiable enemy.

Adding to this, the regional context played decisively into the French decision to stall the idea of an intervention. Any involvement in the CAR—in order to be considered legitimate and stand a chance of success—needed to gain the approval by the Chadian government, France’s principal ally in the fight against terrorist and criminal groups in Mali.<sup>381</sup> As one colonel of the French Army pointed out, ‘Chad was an ally of the Seleka, but also our ally, and at the same time they were on our side in Mali. To intervene [at that time] would have been delicate. It is always delicate. We did not want to take sides because we did not want to turn Chad against us’.<sup>382</sup> When analysing the situation on the eve of the Seleka’s coup, the DGSE warned the French government of a possible offensive of the Seleka. However the French Secret Services were contradicted by the Military and the embassy in Bangui. As one pundit points out, the question is where the military and the embassy did get their information from. The most likely candidate to have assured the French that an offensive of the Seleka would not take place is Idriss Déby who at that point wanted to see Bozizé ousted.<sup>383</sup>

In addition, the security narrative constructed around the crisis in Mali dwarfed the situation in the CAR. Given that policy-makers have limited resources and cognitive capacities that influence the way

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<sup>381</sup> It is worth noting that France has remained deeply involved in Chad’s security policy. Operation Épervier began in 1986 and on 1 August 2014 became part of Operation Barkhane (restructuring of French troops in the Sahel in order to ensure durable stability and security across the region and to continue the fight against terrorist and criminal groups. To this end France cooperates with Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad). In this context French troops continue to ensure the country’s stability as well as to protect French expatriates and economic interests. The base at N’Djamena also serves as a rear base (*point d’entrée*) for French troops deployed in the region. In addition to this, France supports the Chadian Army with logistics (means of transport and fuel) and provides twelve military advisors who are fully integrated in the Chadian forces (Assemblée Nationale 2014a). At the same time, Chad has emerged as an indispensable partner for France in its crisis management both in Mali and the CAR (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2013b; Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2013a).

<sup>382</sup> Michel Goya, colonel, interview by author, Paris, 10 January 2014. ‘*Tchad était l’allié de la Séléka, mais aussi notre allié à nous, et au même moment ils étaient à notre côté au Mali. C’était délicat d’intervenir à ce moment-là. C’est toujours délicat. On n’a pas voulu prendre parti pour ne pas se mettre en dos le Tchad.*’

<sup>383</sup> Interview with a researcher and specialist on the CAR, 19 December 2014.

they perceive, store, and treat incoming information, they have to order their preferences before translating them into policy outcomes. When simultaneously facing two crisis situations in francophone Africa, French policy-makers felt that they had to list priorities as resources for intervention were scarce (March 1978, 598; Johnson 2004, 8; Assemblée Nationale 2013c). President Hollande explained France's initial reluctance in retrospect by referring to both the concept of 'preference orderliness' (March 1978, 598) and the self-imposed limitations that emerged from an incongruousness of the renewed discourse and France's historical presence in that country:

...the Central African crisis began at the time we decided to support the Malian state. This was concomitant. In that respect this crisis fell in the background. This is understandable, given the urgency in the Sahel. For the past ten months, chaos has prevailed in Central Africa. As the president of Chad explained it very well, this is not new. One could argue that the crisis dates back to 1994, but those who have an understanding of history could go back in time even further, when France was very present in Central Africa, too present. This is why, today, we are reluctant (Hollande 2013d).<sup>384</sup>

Resulting from the ideational struggle between the need for stability and the avoidance of neo-colonial references, the constraints imposed by the securitisation strategy and limited resources, as well as the need to establish preferences by discarding alternatives, the French government concluded that it was better to abandon Bozizé during the early months of 2013, at a time at which the incumbent regime could still have been saved. In so doing, the Hollande administration gave additional weight to their previous commitment of a clear break from the past and the desire to establish a renewed relationship with the African continent. On the question why France had not officially condemned the putsch by the Seleka, Fabius commented, 'the former President Bozizé failed: he made commitments that he did not keep, notably [his promise] of a unifying government. In light of this situation we are acting together with our friends and colleagues of the African Union and the ECCAS (Fabius 2013h).<sup>385</sup> This episode confirms that the concept of regime stability had indeed been replaced by alternative solutions that imply

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<sup>384</sup> '*...la crise centrafricaine a commencé au moment où nous avons décidé d'apporter notre soutien au Mali. C'était concomitant. Si bien que cette crise est passée au second plan. Et on peut comprendre, tant l'urgence était au Sahel. Depuis dix mois, c'est le chaos en Centrafrique. Comme l'a très bien dit le président du Tchad, ce n'est pas nouveau. On pourrait dire depuis 1994 mais ceux qui ont le sens de l'histoire pourraient remonter même avant et avec une France qui a été très présente en Centrafrique, trop présente. Ce qui fait que, aujourd'hui, nous sommes sur la réserve*'.

<sup>385</sup> '*L'ancien président a échoué : il a pris des engagements qu'il n'a pas tenus, notamment en ce qui concerne le gouvernement de large union. Face à cette situation, nous agissons avec nos amis et collègues de l'Union africaine et de la CEDEAC (sic) en faveur de la paix, sans pour autant nous substituer aux autorités en place*'.

neutrality and promote a policy of non-interference. French interventionism is beyond the point of automaticity. As shall be seen in the following, this non-interference policy, however, waned once frames other than regime-stability gained prominence and were advanced to justify military action.

### ***The Four Dimensions of Proximity Revisited***

In Chapter Two, I established the link between the individual and the operational environment. The quintessence of this reflection posits that ‘individuals act in this world as much as they are acted upon by it’ (Siroux 2011, 22).<sup>386</sup> This ontology implies that not only external or environmental constraints but also internal motivations need to be considered. Although examining the operational environment can do a good deal in explaining the deferral of the French intervention, it is not the only and by far not the most important explanation for France’s *delayed* response and the relatively lower priority the Central African crisis enjoyed in Paris when compared with Mali. The previous chapter explained the particular attention the French state paid to the developments in Mali by turning to four different dimensions of proximity: temporal, cultural, geographic, and human/societal. These different dimensions of proximity deserve a re-examination in the case of the CAR. Like Mali, references to the different dimensions of proximity contributed to the issue first being placed and then being promoted on France’s security agenda. As Hollande put it a day after he ordered the launch of Operation Sangaris: ‘France is aware of what is expected of it. It deduces from this proximity, which at once is geographic, sentimental, cultural, linguistic, [and] economic, a particular responsibility’ (Hollande 2013m).<sup>387</sup> A closer examination, however, reveals that the notion of proximity did not have the same importance and was understood and framed in different terms, just as had been the case in Mali. This is surprising, given the longstanding and close relationship between former *métropole* and former colony as well as the continuous presence of French forces in the CAR. At the same time, this difference can be advanced as an explanation as to why the inclusion of the Central African crisis on France’s security agenda took longer and never became as forthright as the French actors’ desires to save the Malian state from the clutches of terrorism.

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<sup>386</sup> ‘Les individus agissent dans le monde autant qu’ils sont agis par lui’.

<sup>387</sup> ‘La France est consciente de ce qui est attendu d’elle. Elle déduit de cette proximité – à la fois géographique, sentimentale, culturelle, linguistique, économique – elle déduit de cette proximité une responsabilité particulière’.

The most visible difference between the two cases in terms of proximity regards the concept's geographical dimension. The aforementioned 'distance thinking' (Henrikson 2002, 440) was reversed. Whereas French actors cited Mali as an example of the vicinity between Africa and Europe, this very same Eurafrican vicinity was now being emphasised to justify the need for action in the CAR. Hollande resorted to this mental shortcut when saying, 'this situation concerns first of all your continent, Africa, but it also concerns our continent, Europe. Because our two continents form a common entity that is exposed to the same threats and confronted with the same dangers. Our two continents, which want to get even closer, thus need to be together to ward off these risks and prevail over these threats'.<sup>388</sup> French actors defined the possible implications a regional zone of insecurity in Central Africa may have had for France's national security. In several instances, they implied the possible appearance of a terrorist threat that would become a direct concern of France. For instance, one advisor to the foreign minister confirmed that the 'CAR [did] not represent an immediate terrorist threat, but everyone agree[d] that if we allowed for a crisis zone at the heart of Africa to develop this would create regional instability, which may not directly affect France, but which would contribute to the propagation of insecurity'.<sup>389</sup> Fabius underlined the link between potential threats affecting France's security and the notion of geographic proximity when explaining the need for close cooperation between Africa and Europe: 'In the West we have the American continent, in the East we have the Asian continent, and then there is another continent; in fact an entity, which is the Eurafrican entity'.<sup>390</sup>

Located at the heart of the African continent, French actors attributed to the CAR the role of the centrepiece. This metaphor favoured the development of the idea of a possible spill over effect. French actors seemed convinced that if the centrepiece breaks, the entire construct would collapse back on itself. Thus to avoid this risk and to preserve Africa's stability, which was thought to be both in France's and Europe's interest, not the least because of the closeness between these two continents, order needed to

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<sup>388</sup> 'Cette situation concerne d'abord votre continent, l'Afrique, mais également le nôtre, l'Europe. Parce que nos deux continents forment un ensemble commun soumis aux mêmes menaces, confronté aux mêmes dangers. Nos deux continents, qui veulent encore se rapprocher, doivent donc être ensemble pour conjurer ces risques et dominer ces menaces'.

<sup>389</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014. 'La RCA il n'y a peut-être pas la menace immédiate de nature terroriste, mais chacun s'accorde à reconnaître si on laissait se développer une zone de crise au cœur de l'Afrique ça aurait eu des conséquences en termes de déstabilisation régionale, qui ne touche pas directement la France, mais qui a des conséquences en termes de propagation d'insécurité'.

<sup>390</sup> 'Il y a à l'Ouest tout le continent américain, il y a à l'Est le continent asiatique, et puis il y a un continent, un ensemble qui est l'ensemble euro-africain'.



be re-established in the CAR. The perceived necessity of stabilising the CAR emanated from the belief that ‘no country is completely sheltered from these problems [drug traffic, terrorism, civil war], because in this globalised Africa, in this globalised world, what affects one country affects another’ (Fabius 2014f).<sup>391</sup> The security of the CAR, in other words, was considered not only a necessary precondition for the stability of the African continent, but was framed as an exigency that concerned the entire international community. Due to the subjective perception of distance French actors defined Africa as ‘[France’s] neighbour, more than other continents that are further away’.<sup>392</sup> All references evoking the notion of geographic proximity referred to the African continent as a whole. As Laurent Fabius clarified in front of the Senate, ‘it is a question of common sense: one cannot pretend to be interested in Africa, the continent of the future, if one does not show any interest in its centre. This is exactly where the Central African Republic is located’ (Fabius 2013s).<sup>393</sup> While the Eurafrican idea promoted the Central African crisis on France’s foreign policy agenda, it also prevented the crisis from sticking out as an idiosyncratic issue that deserved France’s special attention.

Looking at the concept’s temporal dimension, the CAR offers a case where present French policy-making remains influenced more by experiences from a not always glorious past than by expectations of a prospective (and prosperous?) future. Given France’s role as a former kingmaker of Central African leaders and despots, the constraints imposed by the past outweighed the possibilities the common history could offer. Just as in Mali, the Hollande administration was careful to avoid any references to past interventions in Africa. Once again, this avoidance can be explained by the fact that French actors identified themselves as representatives of a French state that maintains a renewed relationship with the African continent. Given France’s traditionally deep involvement in the country’s domestic politics, communicating this message convincingly was no mean feat in the case of the CAR.

To avoid the impression of yet another French military intervention in the CAR, the first official

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<sup>391</sup> ‘...aucun pays en fait n’est totalement à l’abri de ces problèmes parce que dans cette Afrique globalisée, dans ce monde globalisé, ce qui touche un pays en touche un autre. Je crois donc qu’il faut que nous ayons à l’esprit que cette question de la sécurité, qui n’existait pas de la même façon il y a quelques décennies, est pour nous tous une exigence’.

<sup>392</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014. ‘L’Afrique est notre voisin, plus que des continents plus éloignés’.

<sup>393</sup> ‘Une réflexion de bon sens est nécessaire : on ne peut pas prétendre porter attention à l’Afrique, continent d’avenir, si on ne porte pas attention et appui à son centre. C’est précisément là où se trouve la République centrafricaine’.

statements calling for military action were preceded by formula of repentance. As we saw above, Hollande distinguished the French government's present practices from those that belong to a distant past when explaining France's initial reluctance to intervene: '...when France was very present in Central Africa, too present. This is why, today, we are reluctant' (Hollande 2013d).<sup>394</sup> Both discourse and practice by French elites were geared to emphasise that it was not the *Barracudas*<sup>395</sup> intervening in the CAR, but a nation that acts in support of the African forces, with the blessing of the UN and for the sole purpose of defending human rights and saving innocent lives. However, this is not to say that history has not produced an elevated degree of responsibility, which made French actors feel more concerned with the fate of the Central African population. This connectedness through history remains one of the distinctive features of France's policy towards Africa. Notwithstanding, the French actors' honest commitment to break with France's neo-colonial past, they could not dissociate themselves from the bounds that history had created. When Fabius outlined France's interest to intervene in the CAR, he first referred to the fact that 'there are people that are in the act of killing each other in a country, which is close to ours due to its history' (Fabius 2013p).<sup>396</sup>

As was the case in Mali, the rupture should be illustrated by evoking a modernised, pragmatic discourse acknowledging the African continent as an equal economic partner and maintaining a relationship that was inspired by potential gains rather than historic legacies. The realisation of this narrative, however, was further complicated by the Central African economy's actual state. With a per capita GDP of below \$500 (\$282, September 2014), the CAR has of course much margin for growth left. However, the CAR's economy did not show any visible signs that would hint towards this emergence over the past decade.<sup>397</sup> Although the country's annual GDP growth rates reached up to 4.8

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<sup>394</sup> 'On pourrait dire depuis 1994 mais ceux qui ont le sens de l'histoire pourraient remonter même avant et avec une France qui a été très présente en Centrafrique, trop présente. Ce qui fait que, aujourd'hui, nous sommes sur la réserve'.

<sup>395</sup> Nickname attributed to the French soldiers stationed in the CAR. The name Barracuda refers to the military operation that deposed Emperor Bokassa in 1979. Since then it is also used to describe the infantilisation of the CAR by the former colonial power. Against this backdrop Fabius's remark needs to be understood that 'it is not a question of sending paratroopers, but as a first step we are going to increase our strength' (Fabius 2013f). Paratroopers were involved in Operation Barracuda as well as in many other punctual French missions that helped to support or overthrow various francophone African governments. (*'Il ne s'agit pas d'envoyer des parachutistes, mais nous allons augmenter un peu les effectifs, dans un premier temps, avant de les stabiliser à nouveau...'*)

<sup>396</sup> 'Quels intérêts défendons-nous concrètement ? Premièrement, je souhaite à nouveau rappeler qu'il y a des gens qui sont en train de se faire assassiner dans un pays proche du notre du fait de son histoire'.

<sup>397</sup> Data retrieved from trading economics, <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/country-list/gdp-per-capita>, accessed on 19 September 2014.

per cent, growth remained extremely fragile. The recent security crisis, for instance, made the annual growth rate plummet to -9.2 per cent in 2013, a record low since independence. What's more, the CAR plays an even less important role than Mali in France's external trade balance sheets.<sup>398</sup> The effective gains for the French economy stand in no relation to the costs of France's military intervention in the country. The total trade in commodities between France and the CAR has been declining over the past four years and never exceeded €50 million in exports and €10 million in imports (annual values) (see table 2, Flichy, Mézin-Bourginaud, and Mathias 2014, 69). At the same time, Defence Minister Le Drian cautiously estimated that Operation Sangaris would cost an extra €100 million on top of the defence budget foreseen for 2014 (Assemblée Nationale 2014b, 10); a sum that largely exceeds the potential gains from trade.

**Table 2. Trade balance in commodities between France (reporter) and the CAR (partner) 2011-2013**

| <b>Year</b> | <b>Trade balance (US\$)</b> |
|-------------|-----------------------------|
| 2011        | 48,267,500                  |
| 2012        | 39,684,323                  |
| 2013        | 30,634,295                  |

*Source:* own elaboration, based on United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database, <http://comtrade.un.org/data/>, accessed on 9 January 2015

Whilst these figures make it difficult to apply the “continent of the future” narrative to the context of the CAR, they also show that the widely shared view of France using military force in Africa to safeguard economic benefits does not hold (Le Drian 2013b; Welz 2014, 609).<sup>399</sup> The activities of some major French multinational companies such as Bolloré, Castel, or Total still make France the CAR's most important investor and create the impression of economic interest being one of the major driving forces behind France's intervention. In macroeconomic terms, however, the CAR's significance for the French economy remains marginal. Notwithstanding these indicators, which should incite a prosaic

<sup>398</sup> For the period from 2011 to 2013 the CAR accounted on average for 0.0012% of France's imports and 0.0084% of its exports, compared to Mali with 0.0017% of France's imports and 0.0711% of its exports. Own calculations based on the International Trade Centre database, <http://www.trademap.org>, accessed on 10 September 2014.

<sup>399</sup> Mali and the CAR are not the only two cases of French interventionism in sub-Saharan Africa where economic interests fall short of explaining French decision-making. Patrick Berg (2009, 61), for instance, cites the French interventions in Chad in 2006 and 2008 as further examples of French cost-intensive French military operations despite negligible economic interests.

evaluation regarding the CAR's future, the Hollande administration continued to evoke Africa's future potential when searching for reasons why the violent conflict in the CAR deserved the international community's attention. As in the discussion on geographic proximity, French actors described stability in Central Africa as a precondition for the more general emergence of the African continent. The same frames that were applied to France's relationship with the entire African continent were now being used to make the case for France and Europe's interest in the crisis resolution in the CAR. Convinced that Africa's emergence was imminent and committed to remain one of the continent's preferred partners, French actors identified insecurity as one of the principle spoilers of this future vision.

...we think that it is in our interest and in the interest of Europe. Beyond moral values—[of course] if there is the risk of genocide we have to intervene—but beyond this, we think that the African continent enters a phase of accelerated [economic] development, which we consider as an opportunity. [Africa] is the place of growth today; it is the second [...] after Asia. Many countries have had two-digit growth rates for the past ten years. One of the principal spoilers of Africa's emergence is wars and conflicts. This [securing Africa] is quite simply in our economic interest. This can lead to more jobs at home, business for our companies...we are well advised to contribute to either a direct treatment of certain conflicts or by supporting the Africans to do it by themselves.<sup>400</sup>

In order to achieve the set objective of doubling France's trade with Africa over the next five years, the Hollande administration considered security to be the realm where they could contribute the most (Assemblée Nationale 2013d). Despite the CAR's present irrelevance in France's external trade balance sheets, interest-driven explanations were not entirely excluded from the debate. At least at the beginning of the policy framing process, the French discourse oscillated between value-driven and interest-driven motives. In the aftermath of the intervention any references to economic interests disappeared from the discourse. As we shall see below, from the moment of the decision, French actors rejected the idea that economic interests could have influenced the decision-making process. This change in the discourse can only be explained as the adaptation to an altered situation. At the beginning of the framing process, France's objective was to raise its European and international partners' awareness of the Central African

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<sup>400</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014. *'Là aussi on pense que c'est notre intérêt et l'intérêt de l'Europe. Au-delà des valeurs morales, s'il y a un risque de génocide il faut intervenir, au-delà de ça on pense que le continent s'engage dans un développement accéléré que c'est pour nous une opportunité. C'est le lieu de la croissance aujourd'hui, c'est le deuxième après l'Asie. Et beaucoup de pays ont des taux à deux chiffres déjà depuis dix ans. Donc, un des principaux freins à cette émergence de l'Afrique, c'est l'instabilité justement, c'est les guerres et les conflits. C'est dans notre intérêt économique tout simplement. Ça peut être des emplois chez nous, des activités pour nos entreprises... on a intérêt à contribuer à soit un traitement direct de certains de ces conflits, soit à aider les Africains à le pouvoir faire eux-mêmes'.*

crisis. Referring to Africa's emergence was considered an effective means of interesting other actors in the issue. Once the intervention took place, the discourse needed to comply with the humanitarian narrative that had been chosen to justify the decision.

It is worthy to note that the interest-driven argument of French interventionism did not emerge from the business sector. On the contrary, French companies have become increasingly averse to invest in Africa while political elites consider it their task to incite new French investments on the African continent (Le Gal 2014).<sup>401</sup> By doing so the French discourse became accomplice of the idea that economic interests played a dominant role during the decision-making process. However, rather than reflecting measurable economic incentives, this discourse emerged from the belief in a prosperous future of the African continent. The idea of 'Africa's rise' had become an incontestable truth among French policy-makers. In addition, references to economic growth and potential gains, many French actors thought, were the price to be paid for the efforts to interest the international community in this forgotten country at the heart of the African continent.

As for the human and societal dimension, given the longstanding French military presence in the CAR a strong blending had occurred between French soldiers and their Central African counterparts. The CAR has been one of the principal bases of the *forces prépositionnées* on the African continent since independence. The continuous presence of the French Army created close ties between members of the two armed forces. Hence, what Charbonneau (2014, 616) defines as 'Franco-African *militarism*' and French military staff refer to as blending and shared experience fully applies to the case of the CAR.<sup>402</sup> This proximity, however, does not extend to the realm of civil society. First, the Central African community in France is much smaller than their Malian counterpart. The *Institut National d'Études Démographiques* (INED), for instance, does not list migrants from the CAR as a separate category, but groups them under the label "other African countries" (Institut national d'études démographiques 2010). Adding to this, compared to Malian civil society actors in France, who are well connected and vividly defend tangible political projects, Central Africans in France are less organised and oftentimes lack a

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<sup>401</sup> Adding to this French companies do not anymore give preference to the francophone space but are more interested in economic power houses such as South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, or Angola.

<sup>402</sup> Didier Castres, vice chief of staff, interview by author Paris, 18 February 2014.

concrete political vision for their country.<sup>403</sup> It is thus no surprise that references to Central Africans living in France were entirely absent from the discourse on the problem solution in the CAR. There is no evidence that Central African civil society groups in France influenced the decision-making process at all. While the president and his ministers met on several occasions with representatives of the Malian expatriate community, this was not the case during the Central African crisis. Human proximity as an expression of immigration and shared experiences as had been framed during the Malian crisis, was now largely replaced by a more general compassion for suffering populations with whom France shares a long history and close friendship. This more generic narrative could have been applied to any of France's former colonies. As we saw with regard to the other dimensions of proximity, the human and societal dimension referred more to Africa in general than to the CAR in particular. Having said this, the safety of French citizens living in the CAR caused constant worry among French decision-makers. In particular, at the beginning of the Central African crisis when it had not yet fully entered the French security agenda, the safety of French nationals living abroad constituted the first priority and principal justification of the gradual increase of France's military presence in the country. In terms of cultural proximity, no essential differences between the two cases could be observed.

When integrating the Central African crisis on their national security agenda, French actors used the four different dimensions of proximity primarily to describe the special and close links between France and the African continent. Most of the frames used to securitise the crisis referred to the continent as a whole. In contrast to the Malian crisis, which from early on aroused the perception of being a direct threat to France, the nature of the Central African crisis primarily promoted an elevated degree of compassion. This compassion was embedded in the broader narrative of close French-African relations.

Taken together, the factors discussed above, whilst allowing for the Central African crisis to be included on France's national security agenda as a priority, also contributed to its solution being deferred during the French decision-making process. Accordingly, decision-makers began to expose the seriousness of the humanitarian crisis in the CAR and to advocate the need for support of an UN mandated peacekeeping operation no earlier than June 2013 (Araud 2013d). French actors did not ignore the crisis per se, but considered themselves unable to deal with it for the time being. Following the

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<sup>403</sup> Interview with researcher and specialist on the Central African Republic, Paris, 19 December 2014.

continuously deteriorating situation on the ground and the alarm call issued by several leading NGOs acting in the CAR, the veritable change in French actors' perception occurred in August 2013. By September, the president, assisted by his minister of foreign affairs, and France's permanent representative at the UN launched an awareness-raising campaign in favour of the CAR. By that time the situation in Mali had become more stable and Foreign Minister Fabius could be confident about the planned gradual retreat of French troops, Bozizé had been evicted from office, and deliberations with Chad had taken place. In particular, the gradual retreat of French troops from Mali and the apparent success of the military operation, allowed French decision-makers to shift their attention towards the CAR and advocate a more proactive approach to the humanitarian and security crisis (Fabius 2013a). Thanks to these changes in the operational environment, the CAR emerged as the 'absolute priority' on the French security agenda (Fabius 2013a; Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2013e).

### 5.2.2 Framing and Diffusion

Despite the deferred inclusion of the issue on its national security agenda, the French government remained the first non-African actor to raise awareness for the humanitarian crisis in the CAR. On the occasion of the 69<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly on 24 September 2013, President Hollande addressed the international community calling for a concerted response to the increasing violence in the CAR.

I would like to sound an alarm, as I did last year on the subject of Mali. The alarm concerns the Central African Republic, a small country that has been ravaged for too many years by coups and conflicts. Today, chaos took hold [of the country]. Yet another time the civilian populations are the victims. We need to put an end to these acts of violence, which, by the way, are taking a confessional shape. This is why I wish that the Security Council would provide a mandate and the necessary logistical and financial means for an African force whose primary objective will be to re-establish stability in Central Africa.<sup>404</sup> (Hollande 2013c)

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<sup>404</sup> *'Je veux lancer maintenant un cri d'alerte, comme je l'avais fait l'année dernière sur le Mali. L'alerte concerne la Centrafrique, petit pays ravagé depuis trop d'années par des coups d'État et des conflits. Aujourd'hui, c'est le chaos qui s'est installé. Les populations civiles une fois encore en sont les victimes. Nous devons mettre un terme à ces exactions qui prennent d'ailleurs aussi une forme confessionnelle. C'est pourquoi je souhaite que le Conseil de sécurité donne mandat et accorde des moyens logistiques et financiers à une force africaine dont la première mission serait de rétablir la stabilité en Centrafrique'.*

Hollande's speech marked the shift away from a phase during which the decision-making process was dominated by reluctance toward a second phase of mobilisation and action. From this moment onwards, the Hollande administration began an advocacy campaign in favour of the CAR (Hollande 2013b). The explanation of this shift can be found in French actors' self-identity, which is largely based upon the perception of their country's specific role in the world and in particular in Africa. While the official French discourse at that point was still confined to promoting the transformation of the African-led operation into an UN peacekeeping operation and no mention was made of direct French intervention, strategists and military planners in Paris were already pondering the details of a possible military operation. As one advisor confirmed during an interview in the aftermath of the intervention, 'indeed, we made the necessary arrangements to be able to intervene as soon as the resolution was passed; to face up to the urgencies. And there were immediately urgent situations'.<sup>405</sup> By mid-October Fabius announced that French troops need 'not only to continue their work, but when the time comes, have to be able to extend it' and added that a second resolution would be presented to the UN Security Council by the end of November 'which gives a mandate to the African and *French* forces to make further progress regarding the re-establishment of order' (Fabius 2013m, emphasis added).<sup>406</sup> These and other statements underline that the majority of actors in the French government were convinced that the African peace-building operation did not possess the necessary technical and human capacities to act as an effective intervention force. As one strategic advisor in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs put it, 'there is always the question [*échelon*] of the rapid intervention force, which remains unsolved. The African armies have reached a capacity level that allows them to do peacekeeping in medium intensity conflicts, but they are not yet able to handle situations like in Mali, the CAR, and Côte d'Ivoire'. Referring to the specific case of the CAR, he added, 'the African force found it difficult to establish itself, and in any

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<sup>405</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014. '*Effectivement nous avons pris les dispositions pour être en mesure d'intervenir dès que la résolution serait votée, pour faire face aux urgences. Et il y avait toute de suite des urgences*'. This having said, military planning occurs on a permanent basis and considers a whole range of possible scenarios. The majority of these plans will never be realised. The actual planning for Operation Serval based on a UN mandate and conceived as a policing mission was realised only very late in the decision-making process (Interview with a researcher and specialist on the Central African Republic, Paris, 19 December 2014).

<sup>406</sup> '*Il faut que les Français - et je salue les troupes françaises qui font un admirable travail, je leur rendrai d'ailleurs visite dans un moment - non seulement continuent leur travail mais puissent, le moment venu, l'étendre... Une deuxième résolution sera donc présentée à la fin du mois de novembre-début décembre qui, à la fois, précisera les points que je viens de développer et qui donnera mandat aux forces africaines et aux forces françaises pour aller plus loin en matière de rétablissement de l'ordre*'.



case the African force [was] not capable of meeting the challenges'.<sup>407</sup> Although French decision-makers believed in the necessity of a military operation led by France, they also knew that a unilateral move or high-profile intervention as in Mali was unthinkable given the specific context of the crisis and the discourse of a break with the past.

In October first official statements emerged that evoked the possibility of an extended mandate for Operation Boali, whose tasks up until then were strictly limited to the training of the Multinational Force in Central Africa (FOMAC), logistical support and intelligence and to securing the airport and protecting French citizens as well as French industrial sites and companies (Sénat 2007; Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2013e).<sup>408</sup> Since intervention per definition constitutes one or several “discrete acts” of “coercive interference” in the “domestic affairs” of other states’ (Macmillan 2013, 1041), that is, ‘the transgression of a unit’s realm of jurisdiction, conducted by other units in an order, acting singly or collectively’ (Reus-Smit 2013, 1058), these calls for action were in conflict with previous claims of non-interference in the CAR’s domestic affairs. On the one hand, its commitment to non-interference, which was more than a rhetoric device but an integral part of its understanding of a changed and renewed partnership between France and Africa, advised the Hollande administration to refrain from taking a more active position in the crisis solution. On the other, sentiments of responsibility and the obvious shortcomings of African security mechanisms increasingly pushed French actors to intervene once again in a region where they possessed both the capacity and the political will to provoke change. Resulting from these ideational struggles, earlier assurances that France had no intention to ‘interfere in the domestic affairs of the CAR’<sup>409</sup> (Fabius 2013e) were increasingly eclipsed in favour of justifications that stressed the necessity for intervention on humanitarian grounds. While the former remained an argument in support of France’s announced rupture with the past and showcased France’s adherence to the principle of sovereignty in international affairs, the latter expressed the deep-seated belief that it is

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<sup>407</sup> Interview with a civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 5 February 2014. *‘Il y a toujours cet échelon de la force de première intervention, qui reste problématique. Les armées africaines sont aujourd’hui sur le niveau de faire du maintien de la paix dans des crises de moyenne intensité mais pratiquement pas au niveau pour des situations types Mali, RCA, Côte d’Ivoire.... Sur la RCA c’est un petit peu la même chose qui se passe. La force africaine a eu beaucoup de mal à se mettre en œuvre, et de toute façon elle ‘est pas à la hauteur des enjeux’.*

<sup>408</sup> The mandate provided for French troops to support the FOMAC.

<sup>409</sup> *‘Non, pas du tout. François Hollande l’a dit fort bien, nous n’avons pas à nous mêler aux affaires intérieures de la Centrafrique. En revanche, nous devons protéger nos ressortissants. C’est ce que nous faisons’.*

France's duty and responsibility to intervene for the sake of other people, in particular if these happen to be citizens of a country within France's former *pré-carré*.

As Finnemore (2003, 67) highlights 'people who are confronted with the fact that they hold contradictory views will try to adjust their beliefs to alleviate dissonance between them'. In the present case the adjustment involved the gradual suppression of the non-intervention principle in favour of the increasingly dominant idea of the need for humanitarian intervention. In an attempt to produce a coherent discourse, French actors sought to gather the broadest legitimacy possible for their future actions by following a double strategy of blaming and shaming whilst simultaneously offering possible solutions. The international community was first accused of ignoring a genocide in the making and then reminded that it was not yet too late to avoid mistakes committed in the past. Understanding this discursive strategy provides a direct access to the French actors' mental maps that influenced the decision-making process during the framing and diffusion phase.

### ***The Forgotten Orphan: Attention, Legitimacy, and Self-Affirmation***

When the Hollande administration eventually considered the crisis in the CAR as a priority on its national security agenda and began calling more actively for an international response, decision-makers in Paris saw themselves confronted with a general disinterest for the sufferings of the Central African people. The framing of the intervention as a multilateral action that would conform to the principle of Africanising Africa's security required the international community's blessing before any military action could be taken. Given the circumstances under which Michel Djotodia had come into power and in particular his role as the former leader of the Seleka, members of which were identified as the perpetrators of the majority of atrocities committed, the French government could not lean on the Central African authorities' formal request for military assistance—as it did in Mali—but needed an explicit UN mandate to legitimise a future military operation.<sup>410</sup>

In search of a receptive audience for this responsibility narrative, the principal problem French actors

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<sup>410</sup> Following François Hollande's decision, one finds a few references—although no official proof—to a request issued by the Djotodia administration (Assemblée Nationale 2013d; Fabius 2014a). In contrast to Mali, this request never figured as the principal justification of Operation Sangaris.

faced, as Gérard Araud argued in October 2013, was ‘that Central African Republic is on the front page of no newspaper in the world apart from in France and in Africa’. Therefore, the French government felt the need to make its proximity to the CAR and the perceived urgency of the crisis that of the international community. Araud correctly estimated the situation when he added, ‘we have a lot of work in mobilizing the international community’ (Araud 2013a). At the beginning of the framing process not even Britain, France’s most likely partner when it comes to military interventions on the African continent (Chafer and Cumming 2011b), showed a particular interest in the resolution of this crisis. As a general in the French Army remarked, ‘I spoke to Phil Hammond about the CAR and he told me: “This is brilliant but in Great Britain this is not an issue. If the British know anything about the CAR, it is that the country is located in Central Africa”’.<sup>411</sup> This position reflects some sort of general disinterest in the fate of the CAR on the part of most Europeans. At the same time, it shows the shortcomings of France’s obtrusive discourse on African issues, which many Europeans disapprove. As events during EUFOR Chad/CAR 2007-2008, the intervention in Libya in 2011, or again in Mali in 2013 have shown, the French diplomatic apparatus is not amenable to advice coming from their European partners. French diplomats are all too often perceived as having a predefined and incontestable opinion on African issues, which they bring to the European agenda without providing for any serious debate.<sup>412</sup>

Laurent Fabius implicitly conveyed precisely this message when saying, ‘even if the CAR is a vast country, its population is not very large, let us be frank, the CAR until now has not been the international community’s focal point’ (Fabius 2013m).<sup>413</sup> Four days later Fabius became more explicit when responding to a question in the Senate:

The Central African Republic’s three initials are CAR, and the problem today is that the A means “Abandonment”. This abandonment is reflected by the fact that 10 per cent of the population today is displaced, that the infant mortality rate is higher than 10 per cent and that with exception of the

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<sup>411</sup> Didier Castres, vice chief of staff, interview by author, Paris, 18 February 2014. *J’ai parlé avec Phil Hammond sur la RCA et il me dit : C’est génial mais en Grande Bretagne ce n’est pas un sujet. Si les Anglais savent quelque chose de la RCA, c’est qu’elle se trouve au Centre d’Afrique’.*

<sup>412</sup> Interview with a researcher and specialist on the CAR, 19 December 2014. EUFOR Chad/CAR was widely perceived as a French mission in European disguise. The air strikes in Libya were preceded by a Franco-British struggle over the conduct and the representation of the conflict. Finally, in the case of Mali the French government staged a quasi-unilateral intervention. Suspicious of multilateralism at the operational level the French military preferred a quasi-unilateral operation. The idea of French distinctiveness in military matters reinforces this individualistic approach even further.

<sup>413</sup> *‘Parce que, même si la Centrafrique est un vaste pays, sa population n’est pas très nombreuse et, dans l’océan des crises qui existent à travers le monde, disons les choses franchement, la Centrafrique n’a pas été jusqu’ici le point focal de l’attention internationale’.*

capital Bangui, where security is more or less guaranteed thanks to the presence of French troops, the rest of the country is ravaged by armed groups. Nobody took an interest in this country, until it turned out that France—because it is its mission—decided to alert the international community to [the situation in] this country...<sup>414</sup>

Between September 2013 and the adoption of UN Resolution 2127 on 5 December 2013, the French government made it its principal task to draw their international partners' attention to the situation in the CAR. France's entire diplomatic apparatus was rallied, including the president and the foreign minister, to communicate this message. The priority of the French diplomatic apparatus was to establish legitimacy for a future operation.

'Legitimacy', Inis Claude wrote in his seminal article on the legitimising function of the UN, 'not only makes most rulers more comfortable but makes all rulers more effective; rulers seek legitimization not only to satisfy their consciences but also to buttress their positions'. Consequently, 'among statesmen, the lovers of naked power are far less typical than those who aspire to clothe themselves in the mantle of legitimate authority' (Claude 1966, 368). The United Nations remains, for better or for worse, the primary source of collective legitimacy in international relations. As of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly since the end of the Cold War, humanitarian interventions to be considered such needed to be conducted within a multilateral framework. As a result of this normative shift, the principle of unilateral intervention has become too costly 'not in material but in social and political terms' (Finnemore 2003, 74–75). At the same time, multilateralism and humanitarian justifications have become inextricably intertwined. A UN resolution has the power to attest the rightfulness of a given policy and can support the view of that this policy is beyond the national interest of the executing state but satisfies the desires and needs of humanity. Notwithstanding the fact that the composition, discourses, and practices of the UN itself are outcomes of processes of domination and subordination it continues to be seen as an objective instance of global governance. Put differently, the UN's legitimising power is principally rooted in the shared understanding of its presumed rational legal authority and depoliticised nature (Barnett and Finnemore 1999). Since the organisation's creation UN officials have

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<sup>414</sup> *'La République centrafricaine : ses trois initiales sont RCA, et le problème est que le A, aujourd'hui, cela veut dire «Abandon». L'abandon se traduit par le fait que 10 % de la population est aujourd'hui déplacée, qu'il existe une mortalité infantile de plus de 10 % et qu'à l'exception de Bangui, sa capitale où la sécurité est plus ou moins assurée grâce aux troupes françaises, le reste du pays est ravagé par des bandes armées. Personne ne s'intéressait à ce sujet, et il se trouve que la France, parce que c'est sa mission, a décidé de lancer l'alarme sur ce pays qui, comme son nom l'indique, est au centre de l'Afrique'.*

spent ‘considerable time and energy attempting to maintain the image that they are not the instrument of any great power and must be seen as representatives of the “international community” as embodied in the rules and resolutions of the UN’ (Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 709). Therefore, it is no surprise that the Hollande administration spent three months seeking the UN’s approval before sending soldiers to the CAR. It is important to note that multilateral justification is different from multilateral action. While successive French governments have been keen advocates of a *de jure* multilateralism, the majority of actors in the French state question the effectiveness and even the feasibility of multilateral action, be it at the international or the European levels.

This, however, is not to say that French actors do not believe in the legitimising function of the UN. If France evoked the UN as some kind of higher authority it is also because such thinking constitutes an accepted practice. Although the expression ‘mantle of legitimate authority’ (Claude 1966, 368) puts the emphasis on the instrumental function of legitimisation, Claude considers the quest for legitimacy to be more than an instrument to enforce gain driven and pre-defined national interests. Political justification, for Claude, is only one of the two reasons why actors seek to legitimise their actions via the UN. To emphasise this point he argues that legitimacy consists of two components: law and morality (1966, 368). Law helps to *buttress* a chosen policy by providing a veil of righteousness, while morality refers to the actors’ conscience and thus their very identity. By extension, references to the UN also serve as a guiding principle for policy-makers when they face difficult choices and have to overcome uncertainty. For instance, Elisabeth Guigou, chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee at the French National Assembly, employed legitimacy in this latter sense, when introducing a hearing of the defence minister and the foreign minister ten days after the beginning of Operation Sangaris she argued, ‘The president of the Republic has deployed our troops to save lives, to avoid massacres and rapes, and to attempt to prevent chaos in Central Africa. This intervention possesses all necessary legitimacy, since it conforms to a resolution that was adopted unanimously by the UN Security Council on December 5 [2013]’ (Assemblée Nationale 2013e, 2).<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> ‘Le Président de la République a engagé nos troupes pour sauver des vies, éviter des massacres et des viols, et tenter d’empêcher le chaos en Centrafrique. Cette intervention a toute la légitimité requise, puisqu’elle s’inscrit dans le cadre d’une résolution adoptée à l’unanimité du Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies le 5 décembre dernier’.

Taking into account the site and context of this utterance, Guigou was arguably less interested in gaining international support than in providing a vindictory explanation of France's action and the president's—her president's—decision. Put differently, portraying France's military intervention as legitimate gives meaning to the decision and helps justify both human and material costs emerging from foreign intervention. Legitimacy becomes the decision-makers' means of justifying their decisions and actions in front of the different audiences, but also for themselves in absence of any objective criteria that would provide for either a clear approval or total rejection of a given choice. Most actors have some moral aspirations or sets of values to which they intend to live up. The righteousness of France's intervention in the CAR was established by evoking the responsibility of the international community and France vis-à-vis this forgotten country at the heart of the African continent. References to Rwanda and a "genocide in the making" allowed for the deteriorating situation in the CAR to be qualified as a case that requires humanitarian intervention (Wheeler 2002; Hehir 2013, see below). Even more than in Mali's case, French actors framed the Central African crisis in terms of an obligation of the international community to become active.

By accusing the international community and Europe of ignoring the whole extent of the Central African crisis, the French government portrayed itself as the defender and voice of the African continent. The Hollande administration not only sought to legitimise its action through an approval by the UN but intended to emerge as the initiator of an international alliance in support of the Central African population. Presenting themselves as the representatives of the abandoned Central African population allowed French elites to add further credibility to the argument that France's present and future policy in Africa would be conducted not against but for the respective African countries and only on request of the latter. France's lobbying campaign in front of the international community put the country at the centre of the problem resolution and thus allowed the government to enact its role as a representative of the African continent and vanguard of international stability. As the director of the Africa Department at the Quai d'Orsay outlined, 'France's policy rests on its capacity to mobilise the international community, rather than acting alone' (Assemblée Nationale 2013c)<sup>416</sup> This capacity is at the heart of the

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<sup>416</sup> *'La politique de la France repose sur sa capacité à mobiliser la communauté internationale plutôt qu'à agir seule'*.

idea that French actors have of their country being a *puissance d'influence*. Permanent Representative Araud framed this understanding on the part of France's elites in almost missionary terms by saying, 'the whole international community, which has heard the calls by the president of the Republic and Laurent Fabius, is mobilising itself around France' (Araud 2014a).<sup>417</sup>

The French government's ability to convince its international partners in such a short period of time of the necessity to deploy a peacekeeping operation to the CAR was not only due to the Hollande administration's diplomatic skills, but was also helped by the visible deterioration of the situation on the ground. In light of the increasing number of reported killings, lootings, rapes, and other kinds of atrocities that afflicted the lives of the Central African populace, the Security Council did not want to appear to be a simple bystander. References to the genocide in Rwanda were arguably the most important narrative frame that both French actors as well as their international audience had in mind, when considering military action.

### ***The Lessons from Rwanda***

The genocide in Rwanda in 1994 was not only one of the most horrendous crimes against humanity the world has witnessed since the Holocaust and the massacres of millions of civilians at the hands of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, but also revealed serious shortcomings in the applicability of the principle of humanitarian intervention. For France, the genocide in Rwanda became its most serious foreign policy debacle since the Algerian War. In the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide France was accused by both domestic and international actors at best of neglect and at worst of compliance with the *génocidaires* whose action left about 800,000 Rwandans dead (Wheeler 2002, 234). More generally, France's role in Africa and the motives of its military presence on the continent were called into question.

By supporting President Habyarimana's regime on the eve of the genocide, France, in the eyes of many observers, became guilty of backing a non-democratic and authoritarian regime that counted

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<sup>417</sup> *'L'ensemble de la communauté internationale, qui a entendu les appels du président de la République et de Laurent Fabius, se mobilise autour de la France'*.

among its ranks the architects and perpetrators of the subsequent genocide (Kroslak 2008, 105–7). When the French government—two months into the genocide—requested approval by the UN Security Council for Operation Turquoise, which it received from a rather paralysed international governing body, it was immediately accused of following a hidden agenda that would explain this intervention. Critics questioned France’s belated vocation to ‘save lives’ while it had done nothing to stop the most important massacres that occurred immediately after Habyarimana’s death.<sup>418</sup> Several media outlets and NGOs concluded that the French government’s decision to intervene was entirely motivated by policy-makers’ desire to prop up an old ally, to defend the francophone sphere of influence against anglophile rebels, and to demonstrate ‘to Africa and the rest of world that France was no paper tiger and that it could project power rapidly on the continent’ (Wheeler 2002, 232–33).

The international community as a whole had high—although diverging—expectations of France’s capacity to contribute to the problem’s solution. The failure to measure up to these expectations made France partly responsible for what had happened in the eyes of many international and some domestic observers. As Wheeler puts it:

... [France] was the only realistic candidate for leading such an intervention. France had the capability in the form of its rapid reaction force based in the region quickly to deploy in support of UNAMIR. Moreover, since French military advisers had trained the Presidential Guard and the militias, who better to close down the radio station, confiscate the weapons, and police the streets of Kigali? This would have sent a clear signal to the architects of the genocide that their plan of mass extermination would not be tolerated by their former friends in the French Government and military. As it was, when French paratroopers deployed into Rwanda six days after the outbreak of the genocide, it was only to rescue their own and other foreign (that is, Western) nationals, key members of Habyarimana’s clique, and the embassy dog. It was revealing of the French Government’s attitude to the crisis that the paratroopers left to their fate the Tutsi employees in the French embassy. (Wheeler 2002, 218–19)

Daniela Kroslak (2008) exposes France’s responsibility during the Rwandan genocide by applying three criteria: knowledge, involvement (political and military), and the capability of intervention. By assessing these three factors, she comes to the conclusion that the ‘French government had a major portion of responsibility with respect to the prevention of the genocide in Rwanda....Paris not only was well informed through its intense military and political involvement in Rwanda, but also had numerous

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<sup>418</sup> Habyarimana’s plane was shot down while approaching Kigali on 6 April 1994, leading to the deaths of the president of Rwanda, the president of Burundi and several high senior officials. The news of the president’s death was the final trigger that sparked the genocide. Within hours the first roadblocks had been set up and the killings of Tutsi and moderate Hutu had begun.



possibilities and opportunities at its disposal to halt the drive towards genocide' (Krosiak 2008, 171).

These expectations on the part of France's international partners both inside and outside of Africa illustrate the burden placed on any French government as soon as a crisis erupts in francophone Africa. Jospin's catch phrase *neither interference nor indifference* (Merchet 1998) did not come from nowhere. Whilst consecutive French governments refused to acknowledge their country's responsibility and implication in the genocide (Fabius 2014i), the accusations against France nevertheless led to serious reflections among the French foreign policy elite and to a reorientation of France's subsequent political and military involvement in Africa.<sup>419</sup> This in turn led to situations in which French actors have repeatedly been put in awkward situations where they had to decide between making use of their capacity to intervene in conflicts in Africa, and by so doing change the situation on the ground, and their political commitment to abstain from intervention (Hugon 2010, 166).

With the trauma of the Rwandan genocide and the negative consequences for France's standing in the international system and its role in Africa in mind, French policy-makers analysed, evaluated, and responded to the deteriorating situation in the CAR. As one of Hollande's political advisors made clear,

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<sup>419</sup> Exemplary of this rethinking among the French political establishment are the following recommendations proposed by the Parliamentary Commission charged with the investigations on France's involvement in the Rwandan genocide: 'First, the rapporteurs tried to demonstrate why France's two-folded strategy of indirect military support and support of democratisation and negotiation processes failed to stabilise Rwanda and to resolve the conflicts that had torn up the country. In addition to the causes that were intrinsic to the Rwandan situation, institutional dysfunctions and errors of assessment need to be added. We, thus, have to ask ourselves how to rectify these mistakes and malfunctions so that France's security policy in the future, notably in Africa, proves to be more efficient and better adapted to its ends, that is the incitement of democratisation, the respect of human rights, the preservation of peace, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.... Finally, we saw how France, Europe, the Organisation of African Unity, and the international community witnessed the symptoms of a genocide and the worsening of the Rwandan crisis—which could not have been stopped either by democratising the political landscape or by any negotiations between the belligerents without becoming fully aware of their seriousness. We therefore need to think about possible improvements of the methods and the instruments of these international organisations to allow them to become able to identify and break these causal chains that may lead to the outbreak of violence in any given crisis' (Assemblée Nationale). ('*En premier lieu, vos rapporteurs ont tenté de montrer pour quelles raisons la double stratégie voulue par la France a échoué dans sa volonté de stabiliser le Rwanda grâce à un appui militaire indirect et de résoudre, par l'ouverture démocratique et la négociation, des conflits qui déchiraient ce pays. A des causes spécifiquement rwandaises se sont ajoutés des dysfonctionnements institutionnels et des erreurs d'appréciation. Nous devons donc d'abord nous demander comment remédier à ces erreurs et dysfonctionnements pour qu'à l'avenir la politique de sécurité de la France, tout particulièrement en Afrique, se révèle plus efficace et mieux adaptée à ses objectifs d'incitation à la démocratisation, de respect des droits de l'homme, de préservation de la paix et de résolution pacifique des conflits.....Enfin, nous avons vu comment la France, l'Europe, la communauté africaine et la communauté internationale ont assisté, sans prendre pleinement conscience de leur gravité, aux prodromes du génocide et à l'aggravation de la crise rwandaise, que ne parvenaient pas à enrayer, ni la démocratisation de la vie politique, ni les négociations entre les belligérants. Ce constat nous impose de nous interroger sur les améliorations à apporter aux méthodes et aux moyens des organisations internationales, pour leur permettre d'identifier et de rompre à temps les enchaînements qui risquent de conduire à l'explosion de la violence à l'occasion d'une crise donnée*').

...the reference to Rwanda is relevant with regard to [our] support to the CAR. Rwanda remains a trauma. There are very pronounced opinions [on this subject], also very divergent depending on the [respective] person...well...on the whole this is something that does not pass...The CAR—twenty years after the genocide [in Rwanda]—is a way of [rectifying the past]...there [in the CAR] we [thought] a genocide [was] possible and we intervene[d] in an attempt to prevent it. This is a sort of *counter Rwanda*. We tr[ie]d to make sure that what happened in Rwanda would not happen in the CAR.<sup>420</sup>

Explaining his decision to deploy an intervention force to halt the clashes first in Bangui and then in the rest of the country, Hollande argued that in ‘Central Africa we were worried about a major disaster. Several serious abuses and acts of violence, directed primarily against women, indicated that a risk of a genocide existed. Inevitably, I had in mind what had happened in Rwanda’ (Hollande 2014f).<sup>421</sup> And Permanent Representative to the UN Gérard Araud called on his colleagues in New York to act rapidly, ‘to avoid the worst, to avoid a catastrophe that, alas, had already happened twenty years ago at the centre of the continent...’ (Araud 2013f).<sup>422</sup> The analogy with the Rwandan genocide is obvious. What’s more, Araud also insisted on the fact that this genocide happened at the centre of the African continent, the very same term French actors used to designate the CAR and to emphasise its place and role in Africa. The two major functions of the Rwanda analogy were thus to facilitate the decision-making process by providing an easily accessible mental shortcut and to legitimise France’s future action. As Reus-Smit (2013, 1058) argues, interventions ‘violate the established principle of differentiation, and their legitimacy requires a normative defence’. What better normative defence could have been brought forward than the preservation of human life? Besides this more instrumental function of the Rwanda analogy, the events in Rwanda had profoundly shaped the decision-makers’ collective memory, which made it possible for French actors to think the intervention in the Central African Republic as some sort of “anti-Rwanda”. By preventing another genocide from happening at the heart of the African continent, French decision-makers could prove to the world and to themselves that they are part of a value

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<sup>420</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014. *‘Justement, la référence au Ruanda est pertinente pour l’appui centrafricain. Le Ruanda en France est un traumatisme. Après, il y a des opinions très marquées, très divergentes des personnalités...bon...mais globalement c’est un truc qui ne passe pas... La RCA, c’est aussi une manière de dire, 20 ans après le génocide...là on pense qu’un génocide est possible donc on intervient et on essaie de l’empêcher. C’est un peu un contre-Ruanda, essayer de faire en sorte qu’il ne se passe pas la même chose en RCA, que ce qui s’est passé au Ruanda’.*

<sup>421</sup> *‘En Centrafrique, une catastrophe de grande ampleur pouvait être redoutée. Déjà des exactions, des violences, dont souvent les femmes étaient les premières victimes, laissent penser qu’il pouvait y avoir un risque génocidaire. J’avais à l’esprit forcément, ce qui s’était produit au Ruanda’.*

<sup>422</sup> *‘Pour éviter le pire, et pour éviter un pire qui a déjà eu lieu, hélas, il y a vingt ans au centre de ce continent, nous devons agir et nous devons réagir très rapidement’.*

promoting community that does not stop short of defending these values for the sake of other people, making room for a narrative of ‘heroic interventionism’ (Gregory 2010, 156).

### ***Preventing Genocide or Fighting Terrorism?***

The aspiration to prevent a possible genocide was not the only motivation that was articulated during the policy framing process. Less than a year into the counter-terrorism operation in Mali, the possibility of the CAR becoming a safe haven for terrorists appeared as a motive for intervention in the French discourse. The debate on whether the CAR could be framed along the lines of the GWoT narrative was furthered by the belief in a causal relationship between poverty and politically motivated violence. This second reason in favour of military action, however, conflicted with the overall narrative of humanitarian interventionism as disinterested form of interventionism and the desire to frame the conflict as a civil and not a religious war.

Since the early stages of the decision-making process the Hollande administration had considered the existence of a failed state at the heart of the African continent as a potential security threat to the international community.<sup>423</sup> French policy-makers listed poverty as among the principal root causes of insecurity and conflict proneness. This way of reasoning—far from being a particularity of France’s foreign policy discourse—reflects the widely accepted understanding of an existing causal relationship between poverty and insecurity. State-fragility, a lack of good governance, and the poverty-security nexus are all part of the same conceptual family and are applied at the discretion of the intervening powers (mostly located in the global North) in order to justify both in strategic-instrumental and moral terms their surgical interventions in the global South, which are conducted in the name of humanity. As Gregory (2010, 166) points out, ‘the usual narrative of a ‘failed state’ may be read as an invitation to intervene, whereas the criminalisation of conflict almost always provides a compulsion to do so’. In the case of the CAR, French actors observed the gradual criminalisation of a crisis that was caused by

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<sup>423</sup> The journal Foreign Policy ranked the CAR in 2012 as the 10th most failed state. The country’s neighbours DRC, Sudan, and Chad ranked second, third, and fourth respectively. Interestingly, the French government, however, refrained from designating Chad a failed state, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/failed\\_states\\_index\\_2012\\_interactive](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/failed_states_index_2012_interactive), accessed on 23 September 2014.

grievances and social tensions. By the time of intervention, the country had become a space where outlaws engaged in criminal activity and subhuman behaviour against their fellow citizens. Intervention in the Central African crisis was thus considered not a matter of choice but necessity. In contrast, post-colonial scholars have pointed to the ideological character of the failed state discourse and claim that the narrative's main function lies in legitimising intervention and discarded the notion as being inadequate to capture the actual dynamics that cause states to fail and 'unable to explain the production of conditions of crisis except through tautology and caricature' (Jones 2008, 182–84). This important—although debated—critique shows once more the centrality of ideas in foreign policy-making and their impact on actual outcomes.

The perceived necessity of intervention was reinforced by the increasing link French actors drew between human insecurity, political instability, and the likelihood of terrorist activity. Despite being contested by some voices within the field of social science, theories that link terrorism to poor economic development continue to dominate the international security discourse (Piazza 2006). This dominant narrative among practitioners and academics, which builds on the idea that relative economic deprivation increases the likelihood of political violence (Gurr 1970), views failed states as 'reservoirs and exporters of terror' (Rotberg 2002). The vast majority of foreign policy-makers in Europe and the US while accepting that 'poverty does not cause terrorism, [assume] that it fosters exclusion and alienation, which terrorist organizations can exploit to garner support, if not recruits' (Duffield 2007, 2). Soon after the deterioration of the CAR had been established, the grievance argument began to be supplemented by concerns for France's national security. In his discourse President Hollande established a nexus between instability, poverty, religion, and terrorism by arguing that 'chaos leads to terrorism. Because what in the beginning was a new convulsion, just another putsch, has become a religious confrontation' (Hollande 2013d).<sup>424</sup> Foreign Minister Fabius even considered the possibility of Seleka militias metamorphosing into terrorists when saying, 'for the moment, we are dealing with highwaymen, but we fear that they turn into terrorist groups with a religious agenda' (Assemblée Nationale 2013b). The intelligence collected during the intervention in Mali reinforced the conviction among French actors

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<sup>424</sup> *'Parce que le chaos engendrera le terrorisme. Parce que ce qui était au départ une nouvelle convulsion, un nouveau coup d'État est devenu, d'un certain point de vue, une confrontation religieuse'.*

of the existence of a serious threat emanating from of a well-connected transnational terror network that acts across an area from Mauritania in the West to Somalia in the East of Africa, with direct links to Al-Qaeda in the Middle East, and that would miss no opportunity to install another rear base once it came into contact with a fragile or failed state.<sup>425</sup> Over the course of the policy framing process, the belief that the CAR could emerge as a safe haven of international terrorism increasingly came to the forefront. A look at the following two statements by Foreign Minister Fabius in March and in November 2013 illustrates this shift on France's foreign policy agenda.

**March 2013:**

Q: Is there a risk of the CAR becoming a safe haven for jihadist terrorists, in particular since Sudan is right next to it and there are other countries...?

A: No, luckily we have not reached that point yet. But we have to be very careful because what we see in Mali, in Nigeria, or elsewhere shows that terrorists groups are a little bit everywhere.<sup>426</sup>

(Fabius 2013e)

**November 2013:**

Q: Is this [the CAR] a country that can also become a safe haven for terrorists?

A: Unfortunately yes. Already there are many brigands and, taking into account the situation of Africa, if things are not put back in order there is a risk of dissemination starting from these terrorist hotbeds.<sup>427</sup>

(Fabius 2013r)

One could argue that this discursive shift was a reaction to a changing situation on the ground that had become increasingly conducive to terrorist and criminal activity. While the situation in the CAR in November 2013 could be described as a perpetual state of instability and violence, there is no evidence that would corroborate the claim of an increased influx of terrorists or the Seleka's or other militias' proneness to engage in the same kind of religiously motivated fundamentalism as radical groups in Nigeria, Somalia, or Mali. Nevertheless, French decision-makers were extremely susceptible to analyse

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<sup>425</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014. Interestingly, this narrative closely resembles the "banana theory" of terrorism, which justifies US presence in the region and the establishment and subsequent reinforcement of AFRICOM (Keenan 2007, 43; Keenan 2013, 38). The 2008 White Book on Defence already defined the very same axis reaching from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Oman as an area where the greatest risks to France's national security were expected to develop (Livre Blanc 2008, 72).

<sup>426</sup> 'Q - Est-ce qu'il y a un risque que la Centrafrique devienne à son tour un repère de djihadistes terroristes, puisque le Soudan est à côté et qu'il y a des pays... ?

R - Non, on n'en n'est pas là, heureusement. Mais il faut faire très attention parce que ce qu'on voit au Mali, au Nigeria ou ailleurs montre qu'il y a en fait des groupes terroristes un peu partout'.

<sup>427</sup> 'Q - C'est un pays qui peut aussi devenir un sanctuaire terroriste ?

R - Malheureusement oui. Il y a déjà beaucoup de brigands et, compte tenu de la situation de l'Afrique, si les choses ne sont pas remises en ordre, il y a un risque de dissémination à partir de foyers terroristes'.

the Central African crisis through the lenses of the GWoT framework and if possible to link it to the activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria, which had gained new prominence on the international security agenda. Confronted with the absence of a visible terrorist threat, French actors did not claim to fight terrorists per se but asserted to fight the potential of future terrorist activity in the CAR. This line of reasoning, as evoked by Foreign Minister Fabius, failed to clearly differentiate between rebels and terrorists and rested on the assumption of a possible transformation of “highwaymen” (or any individual for that matter) into terrorists. However, the transformation of looting armed groups into organised criminal groups with a religious-ideological agenda is far from being a self-evident truth (Horgan 2013).

This mental frame may also explain why French decision-makers failed to recognise the emergence of the anti-balaka militia, which have been at the origin of much of the violence committed since the second half of 2013 and more particularly since the launch of Operation Serval.<sup>428</sup> The question remains why French actors confidently advanced the emergence of a safe haven for terrorists among their primary reasons for intervention despite having known of the non-existence of organised extremist Islamist fighters. In absence of any tangible evidence and deeper understanding of the underlying motivations and strategic reasons behind the fighting in the CAR as well as in light of the pressing time constraints and limited resources, French actors relied on familiar conceptual maps to label and categorise the violent social dynamics that had a lock on the country. Some pundits refer to the influential Catholic networks in the French state, whose representatives were particularly inclined to perceive the conflict through the lenses of religious war and Islamist terrorism.<sup>429</sup> When defining the CAR as a potential future safe haven for terrorist, French policy-makers did more than merely reproduce a widely accepted security narrative that assured a high receptivity of their discourse. What’s more, such a narrative helped French actors to give meaning to a highly complex and uncertain situation.

The ongoing fight in Mali and the extension of the French operation across the wider Sahel region, the activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria, the notorious example of Somalia as the world’s most failed state with Al-Shabaab militias on its territory and pirates on its shores, served French decision-makers

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<sup>428</sup> Interview with a researcher and specialist on the CAR, 19 December 2014. The anti-balaka militia derived from a French discourse that identified the Seleka as the first culprits that the French troops had come to assist them in their fight against the Seleka, triggering a series of atrocities in the weeks following the launch of Operation Sangaris.

<sup>429</sup> Interview with a researcher and expert on the CAR, 19 December 2014.

as telling precedents on which they drew when analysing the crisis in the CAR. Thus Fabius's remark on the potential metamorphosis of Seleka militias into Islamist terror cells tells us more about the worldview of French policy-makers than about the social dynamics and incentives that motivated militias on the ground. The GWoT narrative, rather than reflecting an observable situation, constituted a framework that allowed French actors to analyse and comprehend a new situation by relying on familiar and well-established cognitive maps. The following statement by Defence Minister Le Drian is particularly telling since it exposes the different maps that motivated the Hollande administration to launch Operation Sangaris.

This is one of the world's *poorest countries*. Honestly, our economic interests are extremely marginal. On the other hand, our interest is security, *our security*. There is a *humanitarian chaos*, which first of all produces *emotion and compassion* in relation to what one sees on television: the murders, the children who are dying etc., but there is also the fact that if there were a *failed state* at the heart of Africa where permanent disorder reigns, this would be the *beginning of all kinds of terrorism*. In the region you have Boko Haram: next to them you have the Congolese Warlords in the east of the Central African Republic who just wait to turn this state into a base camp for other adventures.<sup>430</sup> (Le Drian 2013b, emphases added)

Poverty was advanced both as a reason of instability and ultimate evidence of France not pursuing any hidden economic agenda. Security not economic interests were at stake. While the empathy for a suffering population in Africa remained the principal driver of the French intervention, French actors never denied their conviction that a timely intervention would also contribute to France's own security by preventing the emergence of new centres of organised political violence in the name of an Islamist ideology.

The framing of the CAR as part of the GWoT narrative could have promoted a coherent security discourse. French decision-makers were guided by the 'assumption that not only is it the moral duty of effective states to protect and better the lives of people living within ineffective ones, but such help also strengthens international security' (Duffield 2007, 2). Like the intervention in Mali, the attempts to frame the operation in the CAR as France's contribution to the GWoT were likely to meet the support

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<sup>430</sup> 'C'est un des pays les plus pauvres du monde. Honnêtement, nos intérêts économiques sont extrêmement marginaux. En revanche, notre intérêt, c'est la sécurité, notre sécurité. Il y a un chaos humanitaire, une émotion par rapport à ce que l'on voit dans les images à la télévision, les assassinats, les enfants qui meurent, etc., il y a cette compassion, mais il y a aussi le fait que s'il y avait au centre de l'Afrique un État failli, un désordre permanent, ce serait l'ouverture à tous les terrorismes possibles. Dans la région, vous avez Boko Haram, vous avez à côté des chefs de guerre congolais à l'Est de la République centrafricaine qui ne demandent qu'à faire de cet État une base de départ pour d'autres aventures'.

of France's core partners. The major hurdle that prevented this argument from becoming the dominant narrative was thus not the reluctance of a specific audience but the absence of a clearly identifiable enemy. To justify an intervention in the name of the GWoT targets needed to be identified and the existing threat substantiated by hostile actions on the part of the declared enemy. However, no groups circulated on the CAR's territory that claimed the creation of an Islamist state, propagated the imposition of Sharia law or declared France and the West as their arch-enemy.

To avoid the stigmatisation of the CAR's Muslim population and France being portrayed as a Christian crusader on the African continent, French actors subsequently began to invalidate the GWoT narrative by announcing that neither religion nor terrorism had ever influenced the decision-making process. By denying the role of religious ideologies in the on-going crisis, French decision-makers produced an increasingly contradictory discourse. The double bind was perfect when the French government started to insist on the non-religious character of the conflict and then refuted the idea that the operation would be part of a larger counter terrorism strategy. Two days into the intervention Hollande argued:

First of all, I want to be clear and precise. In the CAR *we are not fighting terrorism*. There is no terrorism as such. There is chaos, disorder, inter-religious violence, which at some point can become explosive not only for the CAR but also for the neighbouring countries. Therefore we, that is the Africans with the support of the French, do not intervene to fight terrorism, *we intervene for humanitarian reasons*. As a matter of fact, this is a humanitarian cause.<sup>431</sup> (Hollande 2013n, emphases added)

Since the CAR had never known the phenomenon of sectarian conflict in the past, so the adjusted argument claimed, it simply could not be a matter of religion and ergo the accusations against France had to be unfounded. Instead religion had been instrumentalised for political purposes, which implies that a military solution to the conflict still remained an adequate and non-discriminatory response (Araud 2014b). As for the question as to whether or not France's activities in the CAR were part of a larger counter-terrorism strategy, Laurent Fabius who one month earlier had been warning the international

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<sup>431</sup> 'Je veux d'abord être clair et précis. En Centrafrique il ne s'agit pas de lutter contre le terrorisme : il n'y a pas de terrorisme en tant que tel. Il y a le chaos, le désordre, il y a des violences interreligieuses, qui peuvent à un moment, devenir explosives, pas simplement pour la Centrafrique, mais aussi pour les pays voisins. Donc nous n'intervenons pas – là je parle des Africains comme des Français qui les soutiennent – pour lutter simplement contre le terrorisme, nous intervenons pour des causes humanitaires. Là, en l'occurrence, c'est une cause humanitaire'.



community about a rising terrorist threat emanating from the CAR added that the French intervention was entirely motivated on humanitarian grounds two months into the intervention.

The authorisation by the UN was provided on 5 December, and that very same day we witnessed the killing of thousands of people because the conflict started to take on a religious dimension between Christians and Muslims. We intervened on 6 December, not to fight against terrorism but to avoid the risk of genocide; at the moment one speaks a lot of Rwanda. From the moment the Muslims on the one side and the Christians on the other started to kill each other, you could have had tens of thousands of dead.<sup>432</sup> (Fabius 2014a)

This shift from a humanitarian narrative to a terrorist narrative and back to a humanitarian narrative provoked inconsistency in the official discourse. Not only did different actors issue contradictory statements, but also there were actors who changed their descriptions of the underlying motivations guiding France's intervention. The most plausible explanation of these incoherencies of an otherwise well attuned foreign policy discourse arguably lies in the fact that the meaning-giving and framing of the crisis occurred simultaneously. Several processes of perception, understanding, framing, and diffusion came together at the same time and confronted French actors with the picture of an extremely complex situation. As argued above, this complexity and the prevailing uncertainty partially explain the attractiveness the GWoT narrative enjoyed during the early phase of the framing process. In more strategic terms, a narrative had to be offered that appealed to the international community and France's European partners. References to terrorism facilitated the justification of a possible military intervention. In addition, the GWoT was a ready available framework towards which policy-makers around the world and in particular in the West have developed a strong bias over the past decade. This is why the French government decided to initially frame the crisis in the CAR as a site of a potential safe haven for Islamist terrorists and criminal groups in the making. Moreover, the GWoT allowed French actors to point to the continuity between the operations in Mali and the CAR and to highlight the palpable threat the crisis posed.

Following this tricky exercise of framing the issue without getting involved in domestic political

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<sup>432</sup> *'L'autorisation de l'ONU a été donnée le 5 décembre, et ce jour-là il y a eu mille personnes tuées parce que le conflit prenait une dimension religieuse entre les chrétiens et les musulmans. Nous sommes intervenus le 6 décembre, non pas pour lutter contre le terrorisme mais pour éviter un risque de génocide, on parle en ce moment beaucoup du Rwanda. À partir du moment où, d'un côté les musulmans, de l'autre les chrétiens, étaient en train de s'entretuer, on pouvait avoir des dizaines de milliers de morts'.*

battles and being accused of religiously motivated favouritism, French actors evaluated their country's capacities to promote sustainable change. After having recognised the severity of the crisis by June 2013 and subsequently set out to actively campaign for an intervention, the accumulated knowledge of the situation was sufficient to justify the need for action.

The Central African Republic has in the past faced some very serious situations. But the CAR has never faced such a tragic situation. All those involved on the ground say so. Today, an entire population is at risk. Today, an entire population lives in fear and is subject to grave and systematic human rights violations: widespread abuse, villages burned, assassinations, rape, forced marriages, with, in addition, an increasingly sectarian and religious dimension. The heads of state in the region are worried about it and are saying so. The fate of women in the CAR, as in the Kivus (in the DRC) and Darfur, is tragic. We have no right to ignore the CAR. We must respond, as we responded together when basic rights were violated in northern Mali, with the outcome you're familiar with. We have the ability to make the difference in the CAR. The time has come to act. (Fabius 2013b)

Not only did Fabius provide a detailed description of the situation on the ground and thus testified the in-depth knowledge the Hollande administration had accumulated on the crisis in the CAR, he also referred to the 'ability to make the difference in the CAR'. Intervention per definition, according to Reus-Smit, is always a transformative act. 'Actors intervene to alter endogenous processes and to bring about outcomes that would otherwise not have occurred' (Reus-Smit 2013, 1065). Fabius, in other words, acknowledged France's capability of changing the situation on the ground and of halting a potential genocide. Consequently, the international community and France had also the obligation to intervene. As shall be seen below, this reasoning became the primary justification in the aftermath of the launch of Operation Sangaris. Taken together, the belief in the need for humanitarian action that at times was blurred by references to France's commitment to the GWOt and the belief in France's capacity to conduct an effective operation made the Hollande administration eventually postulate that 'France won't let the CAR down' (Fabius 2013l).<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> *'La France est décidée à ne pas laisser tomber la République centrafricaine'*.

### 5.2.3 The Decision to Intervene

At 7 pm on 5 December 2013, as the first African delegations arrived in Paris for the upcoming Élysée Summit on Peace and Security in Africa, François Hollande publicly announced his decision to deploy French troops to the CAR:

The situation in the CAR has become alarming and even terrifying. At the moment I am speaking massacres continue, including massacres carried out in hospitals. Every day women and children are assaulted and thousands of displaced people are looking for shelter. In light of this general chaos, the Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution that gives a mandate to an African force to bring about security, to re-establish stability and to protect the population in the CAR. France supports this mission. This is its duty: its duty to assist and to be solidary with a small country, the CAR, a country that is far from here, a friendly nation (*pays ami*), a country that is the world's poorest country, a country that called us for help. Given the urgency, I decided to act immediately, that is, as of this evening in coordination with the Africans and supported by the European partners. There are already 600 French troops on site. This number will be doubled within the next days if not within the next hours.<sup>434</sup> (Hollande 2013k)

Hollande's appeal to empathise with the sufferings of the Central African population can be understood as a rhetoric move that aims at justifying his decision and gaining the support for the government's actions. The influence that rhetoric can have on the perception of a policy issue is advanced for instance by Finnemore when she argues that by 'manipulating empathy, agents can change the perceptions about what kind of situation exists and whether it requires military force' (Finnemore 2003, 158). While certainly true, discourse is more than a deliberate misrepresentation of social facts by calculating rational actors with a predefined agenda in mind. As Johnson (2004, 12) argues in his discussion on the impact of overconfidence on war, 'positive illusions...can of course be deliberate as well as subconscious'. Although Johnson proposes to analytically differentiate between bluffs and beliefs, he admits that 'in reality, the line between conscious and unconscious behavior may sometimes be blurred' (Johnson 2004, 12). By extension, I argue that the use of empathy in the French discourse is not only instrumental but also constitutive. References evoking the notion of empathy were more than

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<sup>434</sup> *'La situation en Centrafrique est devenue alarmante et même effrayante. Des massacres s'y perpétuent en ce moment même, y compris dans les hôpitaux. Chaque jour des femmes et des enfants sont violentés et des milliers de déplacés cherchent refuge. Face à ce chaos général, le Conseil de sécurité vient d'adopter une résolution à l'unanimité donnant mandat à une force africaine pour apporter la sécurité, rétablir la stabilité en Centrafrique et protéger la population. La France soutiendra cette opération. C'est son devoir : devoir d'assistance et de solidarité à l'égard d'un petit pays, la Centrafrique, bien loin d'ici, pays ami, pays le plus pauvre du monde, pays qui nous appelle au secours. Vu l'urgence, j'ai décidé d'agir immédiatement, c'est-à-dire dès ce soir, en coordination avec les Africains et le soutien des partenaires européens. Déjà 600 militaires français sont sur place. Cet effectif sera doublé d'ici quelques jours, pour ne pas dire quelques heures'.*

a rhetorical device to convince a largely indifferent audience and justify the financial costs and human sacrifice the peacekeeping operation would involve but a means for decision-makers to give meaning to this operation and thus to their foreign policy-making. Eventually empathy functioned as a constituting element of the French policy-makers' collective identity that eventually led to intervention in the CAR. The remainder of this chapter elaborates on this argument with special reference to the perceived obligations deriving from France's military capacities and the actors' belief to have avoided a second Rwanda on the African continent.

### ***The Intervention that was None***

Before engaging with the underlying motivations and mental maps that explain the French decision to intervene, it is however necessary to briefly discuss the phenomenon of what I call 'France's alleged non-intervention'.<sup>435</sup> Whilst advocating the need for a peacekeeping operation and a more active involvement of the international community, which was put into practice with the president's decision on 5 December 2013, French actors refrained from labelling Operation Sangaris as what it was: a full-fledged military intervention led by France and thus the antipode of the idea of an Africanised solution of the crisis with French troops merely playing a supportive role in the background. Even more so than in Mali, French actors were inclined to downplay the military's role in the conflict resolution. A light footprint was essential to the framing of the military intervention. The operation's code name Sangaris is particularly telling in this regard.<sup>436</sup> Under no circumstances should the impression prevail that France acted as a guardian angel and kingmaker of any political fraction. The historical legacy and France's past involvement in the CAR together with the pledge to renew its relationship with the African continent continued to constrain French action. Being aware of the potential risk that another military intervention could erode the French narrative of a normalisation of France's security policy towards Africa, the official discourse suggested that Operation Sangaris did not contradict France's general

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<sup>435</sup> This term is not to be mistaken for the actual non-intervention that marked the beginning of the year 2013 and eventually contributed to the ousting of the CAR's former President François Bozizé.

<sup>436</sup> Operation Sangaris was named after an irenic butterfly native to Africa known for its light footprint and short lifespan.

policy of capacity building in Africa and was in line with the envisioned long-term reduction of France's military presence on the continent. Thus, the phenomenon of France's alleged non-intervention is yet another instance where struggles between different sets of beliefs become visible.

Notwithstanding the fact that Operation Sangaris had a precise starting point, 5 December 2013, most speech acts insisted on the fact that the transition from the non-intervention phase to the intervention phase was smooth. In practice, France had been gradually reinforcing its military presence in the CAR since December 2012. Originally French troops in the country were only meant to 'ensure the [safety of the] diplomatic compound and the protection of [...] expatriates in close cooperation with the Central African authorities' (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2012f) but soon took on an increasing range of responsibilities.<sup>437</sup> As the number of troops on the ground increased, the accompanying political discourse outlining the French military's mandate and justifying their actions evolved as well. Consequently when François Hollande announced the beginning of Sangaris the decision was perceived as a continuation of previous discourses and practices.

As of October 2013 Foreign Minister Fabius, referring to the proposed Resolution 2127, evoked a more active role for French forces in the peace building process (Fabius 2013m). In November 2013, he announced yet another troop reinforcement and by so doing implicitly declared the launch of Operation Sangaris a week before the official presidential declaration was issued. Defence Minister Le Drian reiterated this statement on 26 November when referring to the forthcoming vote of UN Resolution 2127, which 'will include the French support to the African security mission' (Le Drian 2013a).<sup>438</sup> In an interview Fabius gave on 5 December, a few hours before the vote of UN Resolution 2127 and the publication of the official presidential statement, the foreign minister confirmed that a French intervention would take place and would be launched between 'the vote of the resolution, that is, this evening, and which is necessary to conform with the law, and a date the president will choose' (Fabius 2013q). These statements—in particular when considering the timing of the utterances—show that the decision to intervene had already been taken before the UN adopted Resolution 2127 that provided

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<sup>437</sup> '*...pour assurer la sécurité de l'enceinte diplomatique et la protection de nos ressortissants en lien avec les autorités centrafricaines*'.

<sup>438</sup> '*Dans quelques jours, une deuxième résolution va mandater la Mission internationale de soutien à la Centrafrique (MISCA) pour rétablir les conditions de sécurité en RCA ; Cette résolution intégra le soutien de la France à la mission sécuritaire de la force africaine*'.

France with the necessary mandate to conduct a military operation in the CAR. Assuming that Fabius had not been acting behind the back of the president, which Hollande's subsequent announcement confirmed, it can be argued that the minister's foreign policy statements served the purpose of announcing the end of an internal debate that had occupied the decisional apparatus during the previous weeks (see also Kissinger 1966, 511).<sup>439</sup> Such a premature announcement of a decision that officially had not yet been made would have been unthinkable in the secretive environment that surrounded the decision-making during the Malian crisis. In the context of the CAR, it was not necessary to frame the decision as an ad hoc reaction to a changing situation on the ground that surprised the Hollande administration and required an emergency solution (Fabius 2013o). The reason for this fundamental difference in France's reaction can be explained with reference to the different ways of legitimising the respective interventions. While Operation Serval was justified by a request for military assistance and the urgency on the ground, in the case of the CAR, UN Resolution 2127 provided the primary source of legitimacy of the French intervention. In contrast to the Malian case, France would not, in all likelihood, have intervened without an explicit mandate by the UN Security Council authorising the deployment of French combat troops.

Q: What could be France's possible role? We heard the Central Africans requesting France to do the same thing it did in Mali. What can France give to the Central Africans?

A: As you know, we already have 450 troops on the ground. A limited reinforcement of this force is foreseen. But the CAR is not Mali. The French policy in the CAR—what we also had envisaged in Mali—is to help the Africans to deal with African issues. In Mali we had to intervene urgently, following an attack by the terrorists. In the CAR our goal is to support our African friends and the African mission, named MISCA.<sup>440</sup> (Araud 2013a)

To reiterate, the primary justification was not grounded in the urgency of the situation, although the argument explained the moment of the intervention, but was mainly based on France's responsibility to act as a permanent member of the Security Council that had the political will, the expertise, and the

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<sup>439</sup> On the occasion of a parliamentary hearing on 4 December 2013, Fabius warned the assembled members of Parliament to not comment on a decision that 'will be taken either Saturday (6 December 2013) or Sunday (7 December 2013) (Assemblée Nationale 2013d).

<sup>440</sup> 'Q - *Quel pourrait être l'implication de la France ? On a entendu les Centrafricains appeler la France à faire la même chose qu'au Mali. Qu'est-ce que la France peut offrir aux Centrafricains ?*

R - *Comme vous le savez, nous avons déjà 450 hommes sur le terrain. Un renforcement limité de cette force est envisagé. Mais la Centrafrique n'est pas le Mali. La politique française en Centrafrique est ce que nous avons envisagé au Mali : aider les Africains à traiter les affaires africaines. Au Mali, nous avons dû intervenir dans l'urgence à la suite d'une attaque des terroristes. En Centrafrique, notre objectif est très clairement le soutien à nos amis africains, à la force africaine qui s'appelle la MISCA'.*

necessary capacities to help change the situation on the ground. Given the long preparatory work the adoption of a UN resolution necessitates and the active contribution of the French diplomatic apparatus, French actors were able to predict the likely outcome of the Council meeting on 5 December 2013, weeks ahead of the decision itself and thus could prepare the ideational ground at home for an intervention.

Besides the gradual reinforcement of French troops and the thorough and long-term preparatory work at the UN there was another factor that allowed for the operation to be framed as being in perfect continuity with previous policies. In his presidential statement announcing the launch of Operation Sangaris, François Hollande emphasised the role the African force had already played and would continue to play. As for the French forces, their task was said to be limited to supporting the African troops. The UN mandate, as the president evoked, was given first and foremost to the African forces and France was merely there to support them. From this perspective, neither the intervention in Mali nor the peacekeeping operation in the CAR contradicted the idea of Africanising the continent's security. Defence Minister Le Drian emphasised this point when defending the decision against critical voices that challenged the French administration for their unilateralist leanings in the CAR:

I do not see why one forgets them [the African-led peacekeeping operations]! We are not alone and not only because the African forces are there but also because we are mandated by the United Nations and by the international community. Together with the African forces this mandate is clear. We are commissioned by the United Nations, by the international community. We respect this mandate that applies to the African forces and to France.<sup>441</sup> (Le Drian 2013b)

Foreign Minister Fabius specified, 'to stand by the Africans and not to substitute them; this is our understanding of partnership with this continent of the future' (Fabius 2014g).<sup>442</sup> Repeated references to the mandate issued by the United Nations aimed at legitimising France's action. Describing the operation and the role of French troops as auxiliary brought this intervention in line with the overall narrative, according to which the Hollande administration intended to downsize France's military

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<sup>441</sup> *'Je ne vois pas pourquoi on les oublierait ! Nous ne sommes pas seuls, non seulement parce qu'il y a les forces africaines, mais aussi parce que nous sommes mandatés par les Nations unies et par la communauté internationale. Avec les forces africaines, le mandat est clair. Nous sommes mandatés par les Nations unies, par la communauté internationale. Nous respectons ce mandat destiné aux forces africaines et à la France. Nous réagissons tout de suite'*.

<sup>442</sup> *'Être aux côtés des Africains et non pas se substituer à eux ; tel est le sens de notre partenariat avec ce continent d'avenir'*.

involvement on the African continent and transfer the responsibility of Africa's security to the African states themselves. Araud offered the following explanation of French reasoning: 'we are also confronted with what I call "Africa to the Africans". It is not up to the former colonial powers or to foreigners to resolve Africa's problems. Since the African Union decided to take charge of the crisis management during the Central African crisis, it is normal that France and the United Nations, with France's request, align themselves with the African Union' (Araud 2013a).<sup>443</sup>

By drawing a link between the need for Africans to take on responsibility and the obligation of the international community and France to support these efforts, the French representative later could easily justify the mission by saying, 'our mandate is to support the African force. These 4,000 troops must restore order in the country' (Araud 2013e).<sup>444</sup> For many actors preparing the intervention France's discourse and practice appeared coherent, notably because the AU's Peace and Security Council had taken first concrete measures in reaction to the March 2013 coup, African troops had already been deployed to the country before Operation Sangaris was formally decided upon (Welz 2014, 604–5).

'...at the time when no one spoke of the CAR, there were already African troops on the ground. These [missions] were called FOMAC or MICOPAX. There was already an African operation in place when Djotodia seized control of the state and ousted Bozizé from office...France was not involved in all this...Simply, as the situation on the ground with regard to the religious divisions and the hatred continued to deteriorate the African Union[-led operation], without external assistance, would not have been able to gain [the necessary] strength in time'.<sup>445</sup>

This statement not only once again reflects the prevailing doubts among French actors regarding the African states' capacity towards maintaining peace and security on the continent, it also framed France's action as necessary. In other words French policy-makers were convinced that as long as Africa's

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<sup>443</sup> 'Nous sommes confrontés également à ce que j'appellerais «l'Afrique aux Africains». Ce n'est pas aux anciennes puissances coloniales, aux étrangers, de résoudre les problèmes africains. Comme l'Union africaine a décidé de prendre en main la gestion de la crise centrafricaine, il est normal que la France, il est normal que les Nations unies, à la demande de la France, se placent résolument derrière l'Union africaine'.

<sup>444</sup> 'Notre mandat c'est soutenir la Force africaine. C'est 4,000 hommes qui doivent restaurer l'ordre dans les pays'.

<sup>445</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014. 'Pour Sangaris on peut dire on intervient uniquement en soutien des Africains. Au moment où personne n'a parlé de la RCA, il y avait déjà des troupes africaines qui étaient sur le terrain. Ça s'appelait la FOMAC ou la MICOPAX. Il y avait une opération qui existait et au moment où Djotodia a pris le pouvoir et a fait partir Bozizé, les forces africaines étaient déjà là. Il a été décidé, compte tenu de la dégradation de la situation, il a été décidé par les Africains, les organisations sous-régionales et l'Union Africaine ont décidé que l'UA prend plus de responsabilité. Dans tout ça la France n'était pas impliqué. Il y avait une opération en cours. Simplement, à mesure que les choses continuent à se dégrader sur le plan sécuritaire, à mesure que les choses continuent à se dégrader sur le plan de la division religieuse et des haines, sans appui extérieur l'UA n'aurait pas réussi à pouvoir monter en puissance comme prévu'.



primacy in the conflict resolution was respected, France's support became legitimate and self-evident. The creation of a semblance of normality or 'obviousness' and by consequence the emergence of an intangible narrative allowed French actors to unite two contradictory policies within what would appear to be a coherent approach towards Africa's security (Finnemore 2003, 4). More specifically, the approach chosen during the conflict resolution in the CAR was described as being in line with France's continuous efforts to establish an African peacekeeping force through the framework of (EU)RECAMP. In both cases, France supported African troops on the ground by providing material resources and military personal. While (EU)RECAMP and the operation of ENVRs constitute the peacetime version of this approach, Operation Sangaris was framed as its adaptation to a crisis situation. However, not all actors in the French state shared this conviction. In particular, some of my interlocutors when asked off the record openly admitted that continuous military interventions risked to undermining their commitment to a renewed and normalised relationship with the African continent. On the one hand, French actors put forward the primacy of African forces, on the other hand by intervening with its own troops the French government suggested that these forces were unable to control the situation and thus undermined Africa's agency (Fabius 2013q). Foreign Minister Fabius acknowledged, this undeniable contradiction when saying,

By their own admission the majority of African states do not have the means to settle these crises on their own: this requires material resources and a chief of staff; in these countries this is not evident. One [they] calls [call] for France because it is effective and because one [they] loves [love] it. The only way to come out of this contradiction is to build an intra-African force as proposed by the African Union for 2015.<sup>446</sup> (Fabius 2014h)

The struggle between the two diametrically opposed ideas, that is, the commitment to a renewal of France's security policy towards Africa on the one hand and continuously perceived need for action on the other, produced an inconsistent discourse and prevented a dominant narrative from emerging during earlier stages of the decision-making process.

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<sup>446</sup> *'De leur propre aveu, les pays africains n'ont pas, pour la plupart, les moyens de régler les crises eux-mêmes : cela suppose des moyens matériels et un état-major ; dans ces pays, cela n'est pas évident. On appelle la France parce qu'elle est efficace et qu'on l'aime. La seule manière de sortir de la contradiction est de bâtir une force interafricaine, comme le propose l'Union africaine pour 2015'.*

### ***Capacity Obliges: Honour, Standing, and their Impact on the Decision to Intervene***

Notwithstanding the framing of Sangaris as an alleged non-intervention, by December 2013 the military operation had become a reality. 1,600 troops were deployed within the first half of December 2013 and 400 more followed in January 2014. Neither an indifferent to partially hostile public opinion, the foreseeable financial and human costs, nor the actors' commitment to alter France's security policy towards Africa and the thereof emerging contradictions prevented the Hollande administration from launching Operation Sangaris. Thus, the pressing question remains: Why did French decision-makers opt for a military option, despite having been aware of the potentially negative and definitely costly consequences of such a decision?

To address this question, one needs to engage with the normative justifications that were advanced in the aftermath of President Hollande's decision. As seen above, by the time of the intervention humanitarian motivations dominated the discourse. Humanitarian intervention can be defined as 'coercive interference in the internal affairs of a state, involving the use of armed force, with the purposes of addressing massive human rights violations or preventing human suffering' (Welsh 2004, 3).<sup>447</sup> Framed in those terms, Operation Sangaris qualifies as humanitarian intervention, in particular when one considers that its principal declared objective was providing much needed support to the African peacekeeping force MISCA, which had been established by UN Resolution 2127 and was deployed on 19 December 2013. Another characteristic of humanitarian intervention is the intervener's intention to provoke change. As we shall see below, the conviction that France possessed the capabilities and the authority to change the situation on the ground extensively played a dominant role towards the final

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<sup>447</sup> Alternative definitions of humanitarian intervention exist. According to Hehir (2013, 25) humanitarian intervention is the 'military action taken by a state, group of states or non-state actors, in the territory of another state, *without that state's consent*, which is justified, to some significant extent, by a humanitarian concern for the citizens of the host state' (emphasis added, see also Reus-Smit 2013, 1060). According to this definition, Operation Sangaris would not fall into the category of humanitarian intervention. The problem lies in the criterion of non-consent. As French policy-makers pointed out, France was able to eventually secure Djotodia's consent for this intervention. However, as Welsh (2004, 4) adds elsewhere, "'non-consent" is in practice very difficult to maintain – particularly when consent is ambiguous or coerced'. In the case of the CAR the question of consent was both ambiguous and most likely the result of regional and international pressure if not coercion. While this information cannot be confirmed, it still can be assumed that in the weeks before UN Resolution 2127 was passed the African Union, regional actors—in particular Chad's Idriss Déby—and the Hollande administration had convinced Djotodia to give his consent for French intervention. Djotodia's legitimacy and power at the time—after having lost almost all control over the remaining ex-rebel fighters—was severely constrained and it is questionable whether he still was in the position to assume the role of a head of state and thus to speak in the name of the CAR.

decision. The fact that Operation Sangaris qualified as humanitarian intervention, however, still leaves unanswered the question of “why” the French administration was willing to burden the national budget and risk the lives of French soldiers in order to *save strangers* in a faraway land (Wheeler 2002).<sup>448</sup> Humanitarian interventions by the West are usually explained with reference to the CNN effect and domestic pressures that convince governments of the need for compassion (Robinson 2002; Welsh 2004, 5; Hehir 2013, 5–7). However, in the case of the CAR, French public opinion remained either unconcerned or was against an intervention; even in Parliament the government did not receive the same unanimous support of its actions as it had in the case of Operation Serval in Mali (Fabius 2013p). Therefore, other reasons may be considered as the principal driving forces behind the French decision.

During his first state visit to the CAR, Hollande affirmed that the need to intervene had become acute and the only motivation that guided him throughout the decision-making process was the desire to save ‘as many human lives as possible and to prevent the carnages that were imminent’ (Hollande 2013l). In light of this objective the president considered it impossible to hesitate any longer or to calculate the opportunities that might accompany a military intervention in a resource rich but poorly governed state or even to question the length of such an intervention (Hollande 2013l; Hollande 2013a).<sup>449</sup> While these statements surely aimed at convincing different audiences that France did not intervene to satisfy any economic interests, they also show that the French president and his administration are able to think of and defend military interventions primarily as moral necessities. In other words, the French decision-makers’ habitus allows them to identify their country as a value promoting entity, which is willing to defend these values even if this implies the use of force and the cost of human (French) lives (Bourdieu 1980, 88–89). Hence, France intervened in both Mali and the CAR because the determination to intervene in situations where there is a perceived need for French action and where the French Army possesses the necessary capacities to conduct a mission successfully is part of the political elites’ self-identity. These two conditions are given in large parts of francophone Africa, which makes this region particularly prone to French military interventionism. Throughout their socialisation, starting with their

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<sup>448</sup> At the time of submission (January 2015), three French soldiers had lost their lives in the performance of their duties, and 120 were wounded.

<sup>449</sup> *‘Il n’était plus temps de tergiverser, plus temps de s’interroger sur l’opportunité ou même la durée de cette opération. Il fallait tout simplement - et j’en ai pris moi-même la décision - oui, tout simplement intervenir pour sauver autant de vies qu’il était possible et prévenir les carnages qui s’annonçaient’.*

education and later on during their careers as civil servants, French elites acquire this very specific understanding of themselves and their state's role in the international system (Bertin-Mourot and Bauer 2000; Bellier 1992; Siroux 2011, 16).<sup>450</sup>

Given France's status in the world and its Army's capacities, intervention becomes an option that French decision-makers cannot easily exclude from their foreign policy toolbox. This role conception of French decision-makers defied even public opinion. As Fabius argued, 'I understand that the French think this [the CAR] is far away, this [the intervention] will be costly, but when your friends are on the verge of being massacred, when the United Nations unanimously ask you to intervene, France has the responsibility to do it' (Fabius 2013g).<sup>451</sup> In their work on the history of interventions, Lawson and Tardelli turn this finding of a nexus between status/capabilities and action into a rule that applies to all Great Powers. They conclude that 'if superior power capabilities make intervention something Great Powers can do, their concern for status makes intervention something Great Powers must do, even when this is at considerable cost to both their capabilities and reputation' (Lawson and Tardelli 2013, 1243). According to the English School, the very definition of Great Power applies to a state that cannot be intervened against, but that at the same time holds certain rights and duties in the international society such as the management of crises, the preservation, or an interest in the preservation of the established system, and 'the enforcement of the norms and rules of international society' (Bull 2002, 207; Macmillan 2013, 1045). In other words, for the French state to be perceived as a great or exceptional power, it has to live up to self-imposed role expectations derived from a discourse placing France at the top of an assumed hierarchical international order. In other words, the French interventions in both Mali and the CAR can be largely explained with reference to the actors' perception of themselves as representatives of a great or influential power.

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<sup>450</sup> For instance Bellier (1992, 104) in her study on the ENA (French elite school for future civil servants) argues that the school's principal purpose is to teach how to 'be and appear in a system of norms established by the old guard'. In other words, she finds a strong path dependency in what is considered the state and the role of the self. Moreover, the knowledge and acceptance of the established norms is considered to be the principal characteristic that makes ENA students appear conform and at times as a uniform group (1992, 121). Bourdieu (1981, 3) defines the preparatory classes that grant access to France's elite universities as 'institutions whose task it is to confer schooling and a consecration for those who are called upon to enter the dominant class where most of them come from (one sees the paradox)'.

<sup>451</sup> *'Je comprends que les Français se disent que c'est loin, que cela peut coûter cher, mais quand vos amis sont sur le point d'être massacrés, quand l'Organisation des Nations unies, à l'unanimité, vous demande d'intervenir, la France a la responsabilité de le faire.'*

Against this backdrop, the decision was framed as having emerged from a situation that French actors had wished to avoid but which nevertheless was forced upon them and made a reaction necessary. As already suggested above, the perception of France's capacity to promote significant change was understood as an inevitable obligation to act. This argument became the principal justification of France's action since the beginning of Operation Sangaris. In the words of the president, 'France considered that it was its duty because it had the capacity to act' (Hollande 2014c).<sup>452</sup> The capacity to intervene derived from France's traditional strategic positioning on the African continent. With a platoon based at Bangui airport, permanent bases in Chad, Djibouti, Gabon, and Senegal in addition to the intervention force in the Sahel, France possessed several strategic entry points that allowed French troops to quickly become operational: 'France has had emplacements in Africa for a long time.... Therefore we had troops, as they say, that were *prepositioned* next to the CAR. And the question France, as the only European country, had to answer was the following: Should we allow the massacres to happen and remain simple bystanders although we had the means to act?' (Hollande 2014c, emphasis added)<sup>453</sup>.

The importance French actors attribute to their military apparatus is also reflected in France's annual defence budget, which despite continuous budget cuts amounted to \$61.2 billion in 2013 and thus constituted the largest national defence budget among EU member states and the fifth largest in the world, surpassed only by the United States, China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. But more than a mere comparison of numbers, it is the idea that French actors attribute to their armed forces and that establishes the nexus between capacities and the perceived need for action. For Hollande 'there is no great nation in this world that is not endowed with a defence apparatus' (Hollande 2014g).<sup>454</sup> This statement expresses the importance French security culture attributes to the virtues of autonomous decision-making and independent defence capabilities (Irondele and Besancenot 2010, 22).

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<sup>452</sup> 'Donc, la France a considéré que c'était son devoir et c'était aussi parce qu'elle en avait la capacité d'agir'.

<sup>453</sup> 'Il se trouve que la France a depuis longtemps des positions en Afrique. Et qu'elle essaye de traduire avec une nouvelle démarche cette relation particulière liée à l'histoire. Nous avions donc des troupes qui étaient - comme on dit - pré-positionnées, près de la Centrafrique. Et la question qui s'est posée à la France et j'allais dire seulement à la France en tant que pays européen, c'était de savoir si nous laissons faire les massacres, si nous restions spectateurs alors même que nous avons des moyens d'agir ?'

<sup>454</sup> 'C'est cette conjugaison d'équipements de qualité, d'hommes et de femmes de haut niveau technique et également une stratégie et une doctrine, appuyées par les moyens budgétaires qui sont accordés à la Défense ; c'est toute cette conjugaison qui nous permet d'être un grand pays. Il n'y a pas de grand pays au monde qui ne soit doté d'un outil de défense'.

This perceived need for action was further reinforced by the exceptionality French actors attribute to their nation's military apparatus. According to Hollande, 'France is one of the few countries in the world that possess the defence mechanisms capable of confronting all kinds of threats. And I do say one of the few countries in the world' (Hollande 2014g).<sup>455</sup> Elsewhere Hollande proclaimed, 'it is this combination [of high quality material, well trained troops, a strategy and military doctrine, and an important defence budget] that allows us to be a great nation'. By elevating their country to the realms of exceptionality, French actors imposed a mode of conduct upon themselves that could respond to the expectations that derived from the status of an *exceptional power*. French actors were convinced that their country had to fulfil great deeds in order to still be considered as a great or influential power. De Gaulle's fierce belief in the prominence of foreign policy and its constituting function of the state shine through the French reasoning up until present.

More generally, France's recent interventions in Mali and the CAR are in line with the practices undertaken 'by a sufficiently unified core which has frequently demonstrated its will to use force to reorder the periphery, whether in the fight against militant Islam, the transformation of fragile states, or in the name of populations that are suffering' (Macmillan 2013, 1054). France, due to its capacity to project forces around the globe and its claim to be situated at the upper end of the international hierarchy, obliges its leaders to take action beyond the country's own boundaries in order to preserve the current system and to diffuse the norm structures that are considered as righteous. While this conviction applies to France's foreign policy behaviour in general, it is the perceived proximity to francophone Africa that make French actors concentrate the better part of their normative aspirations on that region of the world. The particularity of France's interventionism remains the geographic focus on a very specific part of the periphery: francophone sub-Saharan Africa. It is this geographic preference for francophone Africa that let the president argue, 'France took on its duty where it feels most involved, in Africa. We did it in Mali...and today we are in the CAR to prevent a massacre—some even speak of genocide—because we believe once again that this is our responsibility' (Hollande 2014b).<sup>456</sup> In other words, French actors

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<sup>455</sup> 'La France est un des rares pays au monde à pouvoir disposer d'un outil de défense capable de nous permettre de faire face à toutes les menaces. Je dis bien un des rares pays au monde'.

<sup>456</sup> 'La France fait son devoir, là où elle se sent la plus engagée, en Afrique. Nous l'avons fait au Mali....Aujourd'hui nous sommes en Centrafrique pour éviter un massacre – certains parlent même de génocide – parce que nous considérons, là encore, c'est notre responsabilité'.

continue to develop policies that take into account a division of the world into different spheres of influence, which in turn leads to a division of labour among those who are considered and who consider themselves to be great powers. This geographical division of the world is a product of state actors' socialisation and can only be understood if historical and societal contexts are taken into consideration. In this context the notions of proximity and friendship come into play. Just as in the case of the intervention in Mali, French actors repeatedly referred to the idea that friendship obliges as well. Fabius summarised this understanding succinctly when saying 'When friends are swallowed up, we cannot ignore them and say we do not mind' (Fabius 2014d).<sup>457</sup> Along with the concepts of geographical, societal, and cultural proximity, the notion of friendship governs France's relationship with the African continent in general and francophone Africa in particular.

For analytical purposes, the impact of such thinking on French decision-making processes can be divided into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations or push factors. Intrinsic motivations emerge directly from the actors' role perceptions and are self-referential constructs that are only marginally influenced by outside opinions. They impose modes of conduct that are coherent and in line with the very role actors attribute to their country and to themselves. Intrinsic motivations respond to the necessity of satisfying the actors' self-esteem, which is a crucial component of self-identity. For Lebow (2008, 64) having self-esteem is the ultimate goal of the human spirit (Lebow 2008, 64). Self-esteem is dependent on the achievement of goals that a given individual considers as desirable, righteous, and just. Against this backdrop it can be argued that Prime Minister Ayrault's (2013) defence of the French intervention, according to which France 'did not intervene to defend its interest...but first of all to defend our [their] values', comes closer to the truth than many critics of France's policy towards Africa would be ready to acknowledge.<sup>458</sup> The traditional rational or materialist mode of reasoning that posits that all interventions, even humanitarian interventions, are driven by some underlying geostrategic interest is embedded in the functional or utilitarian bias in political science. Instead of creating an insurmountable

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<sup>457</sup> *'Quand des amis se noient, nous ne pouvons pas les ignorer en disant que cela nous est égal'.*

<sup>458</sup> *'Rétablir la sécurité et démanteler les milices, c'est la première des priorités. Et si la France est engagée, ce n'est pas pour défendre ses intérêts, comme je l'ai entendu tout à l'heure, quand M. Jacob me pressait de le reconnaître. C'est d'abord pour défendre nos valeurs que nous intervenons. En ce soixante-cinquième anniversaire, jour pour jour, de la Déclaration universelle des droits de l'homme, qui a été adoptée le 10 décembre 1948, la France est fidèle à ses propres valeurs et aux valeurs universelles'.*

schism between these two sets of arguments, more comprehensive explanations need to acknowledge that ‘perceptions of utility are tightly bound up in perception of legitimacy’ (Finnemore 2003, 16). Honour and standing, which are the ultimate means to achieving self-esteem in society (Lebow 2008, 64), played a considerable role in the minds of the French elite when considering possible intervention. Repeatedly, French actors reminded their interlocutors that ‘all the French should be proud of what we are doing’ (Araud 2013e)<sup>459</sup> and as Hollande and Fabius pointed out, ‘it is France’s responsibility and its honour to contribute to the resolution of this crisis’ (Assemblée Nationale 2013e).<sup>460</sup> This understanding was also used to defy criticism addressing the burden this intervention meant for France’s state budget. Trivialising the mission’s potential costs, Fabius argued ‘there is not only the financial aspect. France needs to shine (*rayonner*) and honour its international obligations’ (Fabius 2013p).<sup>461</sup>

To gain self-esteem, however, more than the satisfaction of self-imposed goals is required. Since honour and standing—or status and rank—are reputational factors that emerge from processes of interaction and thus depend on the perception of others’ perceptions of one’s self extrinsic factors come into play. Discourses and practices need to provoke signals made by the respective “Other” that let the “Self” believe that its deeds are considered honourable. Put simply, policy-makers seek positive feedback for their actions. In the realm of foreign policy this feedback is delivered by both national and international audiences. As Holsti pointed out in his seminal discussion on national role conceptions, they are the actors’ “image” of the appropriate orientations or functions of their state toward, or in, the external environment’ (Holsti 1970, 245–46). These images do not emerge in a vacuum but develop through interactions between members of different communities. To sense what other actors may think of one’s own decisions and actions the only strategy actors have at their disposition—before knowing the reactions of others *ex post facto* through experience—is to conduct actions responsive to the perceived or assumed expectations of others. The means of conduct for such an *a priori* evaluation emanate from past experiences and continually adapted images one holds of others. One can see that French actors aspired to satisfy the “Other” and to provoke positive stimuli by their own actions by

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<sup>459</sup> ‘Nous y allons pour protéger une population. Je crois qu’aujourd’hui tous les Français doivent être fiers de ce que nous faisons’.

<sup>460</sup> ‘Comme l’a souligné le Président de la République, c’est la tâche et l’honneur de la France de contribuer au règlement de cette crise, même si nous n’avons pas vocation à rester durablement sur place’.

<sup>461</sup> ‘Il n’y a pas par ailleurs que l’aspect financier. La France doit rayonner et remplir ses devoirs internationaux’.



looking at the following rhetorical question the president posed in the aftermath of his decision: ‘What would one have said about France if it had done nothing despite having forces stationed in the region? What would one have said about the United Nations?’ (Hollande 2014f).<sup>462</sup> And Fabius added, ‘we did not intervene with pleasure, but if there is a friendly state (*pays ami*) that asks you, together with the African Union and the UN, and if French troops are present in the various African countries where we have military bases, you cannot say this does not concern you’ (Fabius 2014a).<sup>463</sup> Defence Minister Le Drian agreed when affirming in front of the French Parliament that repatriating or leaving the French soldiers in Bangui idly standing ‘would have been catastrophic for France’s image’ (Assemblée Nationale 2014b).<sup>464</sup> Further pressure was put on the government by the French expatriate community living in the region. As MP Gérard Charasse complained vis-à-vis the foreign minister, ‘I receive letters from French citizens who live there and who tell me their distress and what they themselves or their neighbours endured. They are disappointed because they hope for a faster reaction’ (Assemblée Nationale 2013b, 10).<sup>465</sup>

External pressure and expectations vis-à-vis the French government undoubtedly existed independently of the French actors’ perceptions of them, but it was only thanks to the French actors’ willingness to perceive and respond to these pressures that intervention became an obligation. The operation, from this perspective, was the only means to respond to the perceived expectations and to achieve a situation in which the actors’ self-esteem could be preserved if not strengthened. More than merely a tool to justify France’s interventions, the achievement of self-esteem can be considered among the principal guiding factors—together with the perceived empathy, the obligations emerging from

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<sup>462</sup> ‘*Qu’aurait-on dit de la France, alors même qu’elle avait des forces prédisposées dans la région, si elle n’avait rien fait ? Qu’aurait-on dit des Nations unies ?*’

<sup>463</sup> ‘*Nous ne sommes pas intervenus de gaieté de cœur, mais parce que quand vous voyez un pays ami - alors que les Français sont installés dans différents pays d’Afrique, où nous avons des bases - qui vous demande, avec l’ONU et l’Union africaine, d’intervenir, vous ne pouvez pas dire que cela ne vous regarde pas*’.

<sup>464</sup> ‘*Sans l’intervention française, je le répète, nous aurions assisté à des massacres épouvantables. Quelque 250 militaires français étaient d’ailleurs présents à l’aéroport de Bangui M’Poko, dans le cadre de la mission Boali, engagée en 2003. Fallait-il les rapatrier ? Les laisser spectateurs des massacres ? Cela eût été catastrophique pour l’image de la France*’.

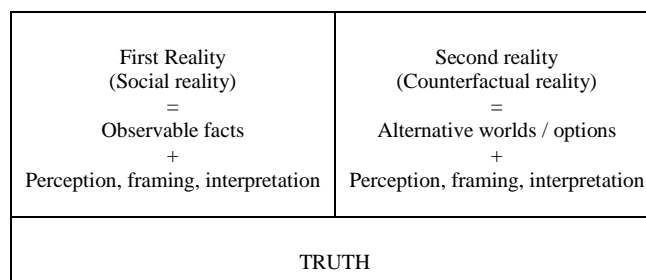
<sup>465</sup> ‘*En tant que président du groupe d’amitié France-Centrafrrique, je reçois des lettres de ressortissants français vivant sur place, qui me disent leur détresse et me racontent ce qu’eux ou leurs voisins ont subi. Ils seront déçus, car ils espéraient une réaction plus rapide*’.

France's military and political capacities, the actors' self-identification as representatives of a Great Power—of the French decision.

### ***The Prevented Genocide: On the Power of Counterfactuals***

While France's push for intervention can be understood with reference to the decision-makers' identity as representatives of an influential power another case-specific factor needs to be included into the explanation as for why the Hollande administration could overcome a series of doubts and uncertainties and eventually launched what was expected to become a long and difficult mission. Following the launch of Operation Sangaris an increasing number of speech acts affirmed that the intervention had prevented genocide in the CAR. Although the motivation to prevent a possible genocide had already figured in the French discourse during early stages of the decision-making process, the belief in the achievement of this goal at the moment of the decision and following the launch of Operation Sangaris took the narrative to yet another level. References to genocide, the risk of genocide, quasi-genocide, or genocide in the making had become more than merely historical analogies with the help of which French decision-makers were trying to make sense of the crisis in the CAR. Following 5 December 2013, the term genocide became the starting point of a counterfactual thinking according to which France's intervention had prevented what it intended to prevent. More precisely, a counterfactual was invented that provided a solid reason and motivation for intervention and was able to accommodate the different mental maps ranging from France's responsibility, its capacity to act, to the experiences in Rwanda and France's knowledge of the deteriorating situation in the CAR within one single narrative. That this narrative described a reality that actually never occurred did not matter. 'The ability to imagine alternative scenarios', according to Lebow, 'is a ubiquitous, if not essential, part of human life....Counterfactuals are routinely used by ordinary people and policy-makers to work their way through problems, reach decisions, cope with anxiety, and make normative judgements' (Lebow 2010, 29). As a means of persuasion and appeal counterfactuals take a central place in politics and social life (Lebow 2010, 47). Counterfactuals consist of vivid descriptions of an imaginable alternative world that merges with the existing world. In conjunction these two worlds lead to the establishment of a truth that is partially based

on the perception of observable facts their framing by the actors and partially on individual and collective imaginaries that serve as either supplement or antipode to the observable environment. The longer such a narrative of an assumed second reality (counterfactual reality) is in use the more difficult it becomes to separate it from the first reality (social reality).



**Figure 11. Simplified illustration of how social reality and counterfactual reality establish truth**

*Source:* own elaboration

The need for a counterfactual in the case of the CAR was fostered by a highly complex operational environment that was not conducive to quick military victory. The operational goal of keeping peace and the absence of a clearly identifiable enemy demanded for a comprehensive long-term solution, which could not be solved by focusing only on the security dimension of the problem. But even when looking at the security dimension, French actors acknowledged the potential difficulty of this mission from the very beginning: ‘We have always been aware that it would be a difficult mission, especially because we want to disarm all the armed groups’ (Araud 2013g). The planners in the Hollande administration also knew about the limited impact a force of 1,600 troops could have on the potential conflict solution. Finally, the developments in the CAR following the French intervention did not give much reason to hope for a quick ending of the conflict. Still in April 2014, France’s permanent representative to the UN had to acknowledge that ‘despite the efforts of the Africans with support of the French forces, the situation in the CAR remains extremely unstable...[which will necessitate a continuous deployment] over the coming months’ (Araud 2014c).<sup>466</sup>

In order to give meaning to Operation Sangaris and to legitimise its costs it needed to be demonstrated

<sup>466</sup> ‘Aujourd’hui, malgré les efforts des Africains soutenus par les forces françaises, la situation en Centrafrique reste extrêmement précaire. Les troupes de l’Union africaine - auxquelles il faut rendre hommage - et les troupes françaises sur le terrain font un travail considérable pour protéger les populations civiles. Et elles poursuivront ce travail dans les mois qui viennent’.

that the French mission had a positive impact on the situation. A narrative was required that was powerful enough to counterbalance the bad news of continuous excesses and acts of violence, which the French and African forces were not able to halt immediately. However, the Hollande administration was lacking the necessary encouraging developments and observable facts that would have allowed for the construction of a progressive success story similar to the one in Mali. Body counts and lists of destroyed targets were simply no option in the CAR. As long as violence prevailed, the weapons the French Army seized were the only visible element decision-makers could advance to illustrate the operation's effectiveness. Yet, the seizing of weapons did not possess the same weight as above-mentioned martial achievements, in particular since they did not hinder the perpetuation of violence. In the weeks following the French intervention, the degree of violence in the CAR did not decrease. First signs of a slight amelioration of the situation and the impact of the French intervention did not appear before mid-January (Marchal 2014). Against this backdrop, to support the righteousness of their decision and to provide Operation Sangaris with a sense, French actors imagined a worse scenario the French intervention had prevented from occurring and which was able to accommodate the fragile situation in the CAR as a positive development.

In other words, counterfactuals were used to explain the military mission in general as well as the moment of intervention. They made up for the lack of immediate military successes and allowed for the construction of a positive and progressive storyline. Following François Hollande's decision to intervene, French actors engaged in a discourse that repeatedly brought forward the same rhetorical question: 'What would be the scale of the acts of violence and the massacres today if France had stood by idly?' (Hollande 2014g).<sup>467</sup> And the answer to this question always read, 'we would have counted the dead, not in the tens, not in the hundreds, but in the thousands because the terrible threat, the terrible and insidious poison of the clash between religions had crept into [the Central African crisis] (Hollande 2014f).<sup>468</sup> Addressing the French troops during a state visit to the CAR Hollande was adamant that 'thousands of lives, and I mean thousands of lives have been saved thanks to you... , because if we had

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<sup>467</sup> *'Quelle serait aujourd'hui la situation en Centrafrique si la France était restée indifférente à la dérive de ce pays ?'*

<sup>468</sup> *'On aurait compté les morts, non pas par dizaines, non pas par centaines, mais par milliers, parce que s'était introduite la terrible menace, le terrible poison insidieux de l'affrontement inter-religieux'.*

not intervened, the violence would have worsened and the massacres which were already happening would have multiplied' (Hollande 2014d).<sup>469</sup> Laurent Fabius estimated with confidence on one occasion that a non-intervention would have cost the lives of 10,000 people instead of 'the 394 [he had] mentioned' (Fabius 2013n).<sup>470</sup> Later the foreign minister even spoke of tens of thousands of potential victims (Fabius 2014c), a figure that reached its climax in January when Fabius stated that France's action had potentially saved up to 100,000 people from dying (Fabius 2014b). As Hollande explained his decision, 'on the eve of our intervention the massacres caused 1,000 fatalities in the capital alone. That was the reality at the time when I decided, together with the Africans and under a UN mandate, to conduct Operation Sangaris' (Hollande 2014d).<sup>471</sup> Not only was the operation as such justified by ways of counterfactual reasoning, but also its timing. As Hollande stated, 'the UN Security Council had given us a mandate. We could have waited. Every day that passed, meant dozens of dead, even hundreds at times' (Hollande 2014a).<sup>472</sup> The urgency of the situation was reinforced by the conviction that a genocide was about to happen and France the only outside actor with the capacity to bring the escalating violence to a halt.

This reality, however, was based neither on hard nor reliable figures. Estimates of the death toll related to the conflict vary widely. The Red Cross provided a figure of 1,000 to 2,000 dead for the period between December 2013 and January 2014. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program's (UCDP) battle-related death dataset 1946-2013 indicates 102 battle-related deaths in the CAR as a low estimate for the year 2013 (see table 3). These figures support the view expressed by several observers such as MSF's Operational Representative Yann Lelevrier according to which 'nobody really knows the death toll in the CAR' (Reuters 2014). What's more, these varying figures qualify the alleged exceptionality of the conflict as well as the use of the term genocide and put the crisis in the CAR amidst other crises that infested the world during the same period.

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<sup>469</sup> *'D'ores et déjà, des milliers de vies, je dis bien des milliers de vies, ont été sauvées grâce à vous.... Car, si nous n'étions pas intervenus, c'est vrai que les violences auraient dégénéré et que ce sont des massacres, qui étaient déjà à l'œuvre, qui se seraient multipliés'.*

<sup>470</sup> *'Si nous n'étions pas intervenus, il y aurait peut-être 5.000 ou 10.000 morts au lieu des 394 que j'ai mentionnés.*

<sup>471</sup> *'La veille même de notre intervention, les massacres avaient fait 1.000 morts, 1.000 morts dans la capitale. Voilà ce qu'était la réalité au moment où j'ai décidé, aux côtés des Africains, avec le mandat des Nations unies, de faire cette opération Sangaris'.*

<sup>472</sup> *'Le conseil de sécurité des Nations unies venait de nous donner mandat. Nous aurions pu attendre. Chaque jour qui passait, c'était des dizaines de morts, certaines même qui étaient hélas constatées'.*

**Table 3. Battle-related deaths in the world, low estimates 2013**

|    | Country     | Battle-related deaths |    | Country    | Battle-related deaths |
|----|-------------|-----------------------|----|------------|-----------------------|
| 1  | Syria       | 22,752                | 14 | Russia     | 281                   |
| 2  | Afghanistan | 7,612                 | 15 | Myanmar    | 238                   |
| 3  | Pakistan    | 1,774                 | 16 | Thailand   | 187                   |
| 4  | Iraq        | 1,719                 | 17 | Algeria    | 145                   |
| 5  | Nigeria     | 1,460                 | 18 | Colombia   | 140                   |
| 6  | DRC         | 1,448                 | 19 | CAR        | 102                   |
| 7  | South Sudan | 1,269                 | 20 | Uganda     | 100                   |
| 8  | Mali        | 822                   | 21 | Ethiopia   | 73                    |
| 9  | Somalia     | 746                   | 22 | Malaysia   | 68                    |
| 10 | Yemen       | 581                   | 23 | US         | 35                    |
| 11 | Philippines | 514                   | 24 | Turkey     | 30                    |
| 12 | Sudan       | 475                   | 25 | Mozambique | 26                    |
| 13 | India       | 380                   |    |            |                       |

*Source:* own elaboration based on the UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset v.5-2014, 1989-2013, [http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/ucdp\\_battle-related\\_deaths\\_dataset/](http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/ucdp_battle-related_deaths_dataset/), accessed on 5 November 2014

To reiterate, these allegedly neutral descriptions of reality, as one can see from the lack of agreement regarding the number of casualties, were pure projections or estimations of a situation that never occurred. This is not to negate the seriousness of the Central African crisis, but to demonstrate that the estimates were drawn by observing an existing situation and projecting this observation, *ceteris paribus*, onto the long-term. In other words, what matters most is not the observable situation itself—which as in the case of counterfactual arguments does not even exist on its own and outside the actors’ minds—but the interpretation that is attributed to the different perceived stimuli. This conviction of having prevented a genocide for which indicators could indeed be found in the operational environment but which in the end had been thought into existence taken together with the firm belief of France’s responsibility to act explain why François Hollande gave the order to launch Operation Sangaris within hours of the adoption of UN Resolution 2127.

### 5.3 Conclusion: Serval Bis Repetita<sup>473</sup>

The crisis in the CAR constituted yet another instance of struggle between different ideas and belief systems that shape present-day French security policy towards sub-Saharan Africa. Whilst the shift from

<sup>473</sup> See Bayart’s (1998) ‘Bis repetita’.

a non-interventionist policy to military intervention was less radical and less visible than in the case of Mali, the issue itself was not less contested. At the time the French president announced his decision to deploy a peacekeeping force to the CAR, the intervention was framed as the only possible alternative. This conclusion, however, was the outcome of a longer process during which several alternatives competed with each other to become part of the dominant narrative.

Thus, accepting this narrative without enquiring the processes that have led to its emergence bears two analytical fallacies, which I have tried to avoid in the present analysis. First, it perpetuates a highly uncritical stance that makes analysts like decision-makers ‘take a whole range of ideas, beliefs, and contexts for granted’ (Finnemore 2003, 4). At best such thinking produces tautological and hence overly simplified explanations, at worst it offers grave misinterpretations of reality. The *obviousness* that describes the present-day discourse on Western liberal interventionism should therefore not remain uncontested. As any concept, humanitarian interventionism is mutable and changes over times and contexts (Finnemore 2003). Rather than accepting something that is defined as normal as a given, descriptions of normality should lead to reflection. This is no mean feat, since any challenge of the dominant discourse provokes violent reactions on the part of actors, pundits, and scholars.<sup>474</sup> However, only by taking on this challenge analysts will be able to unveil the struggles that have preceded the emergence of a coherent narrative and thus come closer to the unstructured and uncertain world that policy-makers encounter during their daily grind. Related to this is a second reason why one needs to engage with the processes that lead to the emergence of a dominant narrative and not only with its outcomes. Policy-makers do not possess an ultimate truth or immutable and predefined interests they merely ballyhoo like door-to-door salesmen the virtues of a vacuum cleaner. This criticism is directed against both narrowly defined rational choice approaches and works that take France’s neo-colonial attitude for granted. Analysts of either strand assume an underlying, oftentimes material agenda, which they advance as the ultimate explanation of French action. By so doing, they eclipse the processes during which foreign policy is made and which, as I hope to have shown, are the key to our understanding of specific decisions and foreign policy outcomes.

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<sup>474</sup> That dominant narratives are guarded jealously becomes understandable if one considers the difficulties these ideas had to overcome before establishing themselves as accepted norms.

Even more than in the case of Mali, the CAR confronted the Hollande administration with a situation that risked undermining the narrative of France's renewed policy towards Africa. The on-going operation in Mali and the blurred political situation on the ground made the French government hesitate until the motivation to intervene began to supersede the actors' doubts. The site of the crisis reinforced both the perceived need for French intervention and the fear of provoking undesired consequences and thus amplified the ideational struggles between the different mental maps. At the heart of the African continent and on the territory of the *Cinderella* of France's former colonial Empire (Brustier 1962) the crisis in the CAR gave rise to both unwanted notions of neo-colonialism and high degrees of compassion. In a first attempt to justify a more active security policy towards the CAR without creating the impression that France was prolonging its neo-colonial policy-making of yore, French actors framed the crisis in terms of the GWoT narrative. While this move was instrumental to some extent—insofar as it served as a discursive tool that would make the international community receptive to this crisis in a country that traditionally had remained on the margins of the international security agenda—it was as much an expression of a belief system that had become inherent in the minds of many Western elites when speaking of international security. Against the backdrop of the intervention in Mali, global Islamist terrorism became a frame that prompted French decision-makers to understand the crisis in the CAR as a potential cause and future safe haven of terrorist activities.

After it had become obvious that the GWoT narrative was of no use to consciously and/or sub-consciously deal with the conflict in the CAR, the satisfaction of the principles of honour and standing remained the principal push factor for intervention. By evoking their nation's greatness, rank, and glory French actors compensated for the lack of a direct threat to France's national security and the lower degree of perceived proximity when evaluating the different options at their disposal (Cerny 1980; Vaïsse 1998; Krotz 2001). However, French actors continued to be torn between their reluctance to launch yet another intervention on the African continent and the need to satisfy their self-esteem until a very advanced stage of the decision-making process. In contrast to Operation Serval, the principal advocates of Operation Sangaris were to be found in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to some observers, Laurent Fabius considered a well-managed intervention in the CAR as a means to compensate for the perceived absence of his Ministry during the Malian crisis. However, once again during the



implementation process French diplomats were absent. While the military entered Bangui and the embassy's defence attachés could rely on an ever denser network of supporting staff, the number of diplomatic staff remained unaltered.<sup>475</sup>

The genocide in Rwanda and the international community's failure to prevent it emerged as the principal analogy with the help of which French actors argued in favour of a timely intervention. By summer 2013, French decision-makers found themselves in a situation that called forth painful references to the failed crisis management in Rwanda two decades earlier. In fact, the Socialist government had become witness of the CAR's descent into violence. Reminded of the consequences of non-intervention during the Rwandan crisis, the French government concluded that it could no longer stand by idly. References to the Rwandan genocide and demonstrations of empathy with the Central African population are in line with the broader shift in recent security debates away from state security to human security, which is 'viewed as a sorely needed venue for highlighting the particular vulnerabilities of peoples who suffer from violence from representatives of the state, as well as other forms of violence and injustices' (Stern and Öjendal 2010, 15). The increasing awareness that action was needed provoked another contradiction in the French discourse. By advancing the option of a French intervention, the Hollande administration regional actors incapable of solving the problem. Still a few months earlier the same regional actors were framed as the key of any solution to the Central African crisis. The actors' belief in France being a *puissance d'influence* and their conviction of facing another genocide at the heart of the African continent promoted the sentiment of responsibility, which soon became the major driving force behind the French intervention. As Fabius summarised, 'if you are a global power you cannot walk your way, look the other way, and leave a friendly nation destroy itself' (Fabius 2014g).<sup>476</sup> This sentiment of responsibility and the herewith related perceived need for action were further reinforced by the merging of individual and collective identities. Government officials and politicians identify with the state they represent, 'since the prestige associated with the institutions strongly influences [their] personal prestige' (Lindemann 2013, 153). Vice-versa, institutional failure

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<sup>475</sup> Interview with a researcher and specialist on the CAR, 19 December 2014. Besides the Consulate staff and the Department for Cooperation, only three political advisors were in charge of the French embassy in Bangui.

<sup>476</sup> 'Quand on est une puissance globale, on ne peut pas passer son chemin, détourner le regard et laisser un pays ami s'autodétruire'.

becomes personal failure. The further one ascends the hierarchical ladder of the state the more one's own identity merges with the state's collective identity. Due to the extended powers French presidents enjoy in the realm of foreign policy it is no wonder that the blending of the group identity and his individual identity were particularly pronounced in François Hollande's mental maps. As the president stated on one occasion, 'I am responsible because I am the head of state of a country that has ties with Africa, because we are solidary with this continent...I have a particular responsibility and therefore I care for France being at the forefront' (Hollande 2013b).<sup>477</sup>

In the end the perceived need for intervention won over the objections against it. Rooted in the French actors' identity and being the expression of their strive for honour and standing in the international arena, the French decision-making process produced a positive evaluation of France's capacities to provoke change and concluded that it was its responsibility to stand by the people of the CAR. This evaluation was spurred by the positive experience the Hollande administration had in Mali just before launching Operation Sangaris: 'Those in the inner circles of the state who planned militarily and prepared politically the eventuality of intervention in the CAR [...] all had in mind how things had been prepared for Mali'.<sup>478</sup> Not only was the intervention in the Sahel successful at the operational level, but it also received accolades from France's African and international partners. In addition, there was an overwhelming support for Operation Serval. With this in mind, French actors could hope for the re-enactment of a similar scene notwithstanding the different stage the CAR constituted.

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<sup>477</sup> *Mais j'ai de la responsabilité, parce que je suis à la tête d'un pays qui a un lien avec m'Afrique, parce que nous sommes solidaires de ce continent, parce qu'il y a des populations qui se sont mélangées par la mobilité, par les déplacements, j'ai une responsabilité particulière et donc je tiens à ce que la France soit à l'initiative.*

<sup>478</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014. *'Dans le cercle de l'état où on a planifié militairement et préparer politiquement les éventualités d'une intervention en RCA, on avait tous en tête la manière dont les choses se sont préparer pour le Mali. Dans les deux cas le système français institutionnelle fait que si le Président décide d'envoyer des troupes, dans l'instant de quelques heures ils sont sur le terrain.'*

# Conclusion

Decisions are always a matter of choice. Understanding the choices that have led to France's two latest military operations in sub-Saharan Africa has been the primary objective of this project. The research began with the paradox of a French political discourse that promoted military disengagement from Africa and African ownership in security matters while at the same time French troops intervened in two conflicts in the country's former backyard. Starting with the observation that French security policy towards Africa oscillates between what might seem an attempt to roll back the wheels of history and a continuous adaptation to a changing international environment in which a globalised Africa acts and is acted upon in a globalised world, this work has sought to unravel the mysteries of French decision-making. By dissecting decision-making processes and engaging with the mental frames that influence perceptions, create interest, and eventually result in observable policy outcomes, the study has sought to disenchant the sacred realm of French security policy under the Hollande administration. While this project focussed on French military interventions in Mali and the CAR, its implications reach beyond these two specific cases. This final chapter summarises the thesis's principal findings with view of their case-specific empirical and broader theoretical implications.

## 'Cheese-eating Warriors'<sup>479</sup>

France no doubt continues to be a vigorous security actor and peacekeeper in francophone Africa. As the most implicated Western country in Africa, France remains at the forefront of multilateral conflict resolutions and interventions. Traditional roles do not disappear easily. Accordingly, geostrategic and material considerations or neo-colonial ambitions continue to be the most used variables to explain French interventionism. While it is certainly true that 'strong states intervene in weak ones when it serves their geostrategic and economic interests' (Finnemore 2003, 5), the present work has shown that France's decisions to intervene in Mali and the CAR were not simply transpositions of a pre-defined

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<sup>479</sup> See The Economist 2014.

national interest but resulted from a process of intensive ideational struggles between competing concepts and beliefs.

In both cases French actors were torn between mutually contradictory principles. On the one hand, French decision-makers subscribed to the doctrine of multilateralism and promoted an Africanisation of Africa's security. Consequently, the French government was committed to limiting its implication in the two conflicts to some low-profile political, financial, and military support of an African-led intervention force—be it AFISMA in Mali or MISCA in the CAR. On the other hand, as representatives of an influential power (*puissance d'influence*), French decision-makers deemed it their responsibility to create stability in a region where their country possessed the military experience, expertise, and capacity as well as the necessary political clout to provoke change. Once French decision-makers began to judge a successful conflict resolution through an African-led multilateral intervention increasingly unlikely, they embarked on a course that challenged the established narrative of indirect support. In the case of Mali, the Hollande administration made a sudden U-turn from a strict non-interventionist discourse to one that framed France as the lead nation of an international coalition in the fight against global terrorism, a threat that was said to not only afflict the Sahel but also Europe and the international community in general. In the case of the CAR, this discursive shift occurred more gradually. The previous intervention in Mali had consolidated the idea in the socialist government that, if called upon, France would assume its duties and intervene in a friendly nation. Therefore, disaffirmations about a possible French participation in combat activities were less categorical than it had been the case on the eve of Operation Serval in Mali.

Competing principles prevailed and led to dissent among the different decision-units in the French state. We saw the Ministry of Defence emerging as a proponent of early intervention in Mali as opposed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which rather believed in a diplomatic and multilateral solution until the very last minute. The complexity of the two situations provoked further inconsistencies within the discourses of various individual actors. This was the case of President Hollande, who was visibly torn between the different belief systems that had emerged during the decision-making processes. For a long time it was unclear if the president would abide by his non-interventionist discourse or comply with the self-imposed burden of wanting to be a responsible actor on the international scene. Role theory has

distinguished two conditions of incompatibility between role expectations. First, the so-called role conflict, 'exists where honoring one expectation leads to behaviour that violates another'. A second, labelled role competition, emerges when 'actions taken to honor one expectation compete in time and resources with actions necessary to meet another expectation' (Backman 1970, 315). Both conditions were present during the decision-making processes that led to the French interventions in Mali and the CAR and help understand not only the conflict between different decision-units but also within the same individuals. From an analytical point of view, only by allowing for interests to emerge and form during these processes can we make sense of the president's volte-face, which risked undermining his credibility as well as challenging some of his core convictions and beliefs. Social psychologists describing decision-making dilemmas argue that individuals 'faced with conflicting expectations A and B' either conform to one option, 'compromise by meeting both expectations in part...[or] avoid conforming to either' (Backman 1970, 318). In both cases, the decision-making process was first marked by the desire for compromise but ended with a clear choice.

France's longstanding relationship with the African continent constrained French actors in their decision-making and simultaneously pushed them towards ever-deeper involvement in the resolution of the respective crisis. References to historical, cultural, human/societal, and geographic proximity were used extensively when they were thought not to provoke accusations of neo-colonial greed and avoided if the contrary was the case. This selective use of history challenges the argument of France following a neo-colonial policy as the latter cannot account for such differentiation.

Empathy and affect are, according to Finnemore (2003, 144), the two major driving forces that make leaders more likely to intervene in situations of human rights violations. She demonstrates this point by showing how nineteenth century interventionism was guided by the idea of a transnational Christian community. Likewise for French decision-makers, empathy with the people in Mali and the CAR, or what was framed as empathy, constituted another influential factor inciting French actors to decide on intervention.

Empathy and responsibility for the "Other" were enabled and enhanced by the perceived proximity between France and the African continent. Myers writes, 'the best single predictor of whether two people are friends is their sheer proximity' (1996, 499 quoted in Finnemore 2003, 155). And Finnemore (2003,

155) adds, ‘proximity increases people’s exposure to one another, and mere exposure is enough to prompt positive affect’. This is also in line with Jervis’s finding that ‘perceptions are influenced by immediate concerns as well as by more deeply rooted expectations. A person will perceive and interpret stimuli in terms of what is at the front of his [her] mind....Familiarity with an object is not enough. The person must also expect it to be present’ (Jervis 1976, 145; 203). Perceived proximity played a crucial role in the emergence and the subsequent framing of the two crises in francophone Africa. French actors were concerned by the events in Mali and the CAR because of the aforementioned forms of proximity. In particular, since proximity is a relative and not an absolute concept, it was sufficient for French actors to feel closer to the crises in Mali and the CAR than the rest of Europe in order to believe they must fulfil a special role with special responsibilities. Proximity perceived across the four dimensions mentioned above made French actors agree that ‘Africa is not a continent like any other’.<sup>480</sup> One advisor to the president argued that Mali constituted ‘a theatre of operations that the French know because it is enough to go to the next café where they can talk to a Malian who will tell them “yes, we need to do it”’.<sup>481</sup> Thanks to these close ties, decision-makers in Paris find it easier to justify the need for intervention in francophone Africa than in other places in the world where responsibility does not meet proximity, as it is the case in Afghanistan or Syria.<sup>482</sup>

However, since ‘it is exposure that matters, geographic proximity may not be as important as “functional proximity” (Finnemore 2003, 155). This last point has been corroborated by the difference that could be drawn between real and perceived geographical proximity. French leaders were inclined to perceive the Malian crisis in particular as a crisis on ‘Europe’s doorstep’ rather than a conflict in the Sahel-Sahara and, in so doing, were ready to ignore the real distance that separates the two geographic entities. The functional dimension had merged with the geographic dimension of proximity and created a *distorted* or subjective understanding of distance. By highlighting the vicinity of the two continents this subjective understanding of distance brought about an increased threat perception. French decision-

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<sup>480</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014. ‘*Pour la France l’Afrique n’est pas un continent comme les autres*’.

<sup>481</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014. ‘*Troisièmement, un théâtre d’opération que les Français connaissent, parce qu’il suffit qu’ils aillent au café et il y a un Malien avec qui ils peuvent en parler, et le Malien va leur dire « oui, il faut le faire ». La diaspora malienne ici était pour cette opération. Il y avait un très fort consensus pour cette opération*’.

<sup>482</sup> Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 16 September 2013.

makers were convinced that a deterioration of the situations in Mali and the CAR would have serious implications for not only the concerned states and the region but also for Europe and France.

In comparison, the sentiment of perceived proximity was more developed in the Malian case than it was in the CAR. In contrast to the Malian case where the perception of a close connection between Africa and Europe was supported, the crisis in the CAR failed to provoke similar sentiments among French elites. While Mali reinforced the proximity narrative, the CAR was simply affected by it. At first glance, this seems surprising given the long-standing and close history France and the CAR share with each other and the continuous French military cooperation between the two countries that accounted for the presence of a French contingent in Bangui even before the launch of Operation Sangaris. As I have argued in Chapter Five, several factors have contributed to this difference in perception. First the conflict in the CAR was primarily described as part of larger regional instability. While framing of the CAR as the centrepiece of the African continent highlighted the importance of safeguarding the country's integrity and thus provided a rationale for intervention, it also prevented the crisis in the CAR from emerging as an idiosyncratic issue on the French security agenda for a long time. Additionally, French decision-makers were more alert to avoid references to a common history, which would have been able to increase the degree of perceived proximity but also risked to provoke negative connotations given France's infamous past involvement in what was once known as the Cinderella of the French Empire. Finally, the co-occurrence of the two crises and France's implication in a war in the Sahel, the outcome of which remained uncertain and largely unpredictable until the second half of 2013, made French actors take a more reluctant stance vis-à-vis intervention in the CAR at first.

In the end, the Hollande administration's decisions to intervene in both instances highlights the strong influence of the concept of responsibility. Notwithstanding the financial burden and the political and human risks the military operations entailed, Hollande and his administration still deemed it their responsibility to act.<sup>483</sup> Although the two crises gave rise to different mental maps and analogies that dominated the French government's thoughts at the moment of the respective decisions—terrorism in

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<sup>483</sup> To name but a few of the operations' likely costs and risks: First, the interventions were costly and exceeded the yearly budget programmed for external operations. They also risked France being labelled an imperialist power or a crusader in a war against fundamentalist forces entailing further consequences for France's national security. Lastly the chances were high that the French military would get embroiled in long-lasting counterinsurgency and peacekeeping operations.

the Sahel, the risk of genocide in the CAR—both appealed to the decision-makers’ sense of responsibility, which was able to trump all constraints. This sentiment of responsibility was further enhanced by the fact that, at the very moment of decision, state action became an individual cause of those who were in the position to decide in the name of France. A strong identification with a certain conception of the French state and its role in the world turned the once hesitating President Hollande into the decisive Commander Hollande (Notin 2014, 177–79). Collective action became a matter of personal prestige. (Lindemann 2013, 153). As Hollande stated in the context of the Central African crisis, ‘I am responsible because I am the head of state of a country that has [close] ties with Africa; because we are solidary with this continent. ...I have a particular responsibility and therefore I care that France is at the forefront’ (Hollande 2013b).<sup>484</sup>

This being said, the triumph of the responsibility narrative does not make the Hollande administration an entirely altruistic actor whose sole interest and purpose is that of ‘saving strangers’ (Wheeler 2002). As Minter details in his foreword to Schmidt’s volume on foreign intervention in Africa, ‘The concept of a purely humanitarian intervention simply to aid innocent civilians, with no political or military implications, is an illusion’ (Minter in Schmidt 2013, 15).

As mentioned above, French actors perceive themselves as representatives of a *puissance d’influence*. To maintain this role conception, they seek external confirmation of the images they hold of the “Self” and the “Other”. In other words, the construction of a security narrative needed to find acceptance among different domestic and international audiences. Or as Mead (1962, 204) put it, a policy ‘must be recognized by others to have the very values, which we want to have belong to it’. Consequently the success or failure of any action is not only in the hands of the actors that initiate a given action, but also depends on the specific addressees as well as on a wider audience. Richard Ned Lebow acknowledges this last point when arguing that ‘social exchange and mutual constitution’ transform material capabilities in power and influence (Lebow 2007, 121).<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> ‘Mais j’ai de la responsabilité, parce que je suis à la tête d’un pays qui a un lien avec l’Afrique, parce que nous sommes solidaires de ce continent, parce qu’il y a des populations qui se sont mélangées par la mobilité, par les déplacements, j’ai une responsabilité particulière et donc je tiens à ce que la France soit à l’initiative’.

<sup>485</sup> Power should not simply be understood as a state’s material capabilities or resources but as the ability to change other states’ behaviour so that it concurs with the own interests and preferences (Nye 2011, xiii). Joseph Nye’s concept of *soft power* makes room for such inclusive understanding of power by considering ‘intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions’ (Nye 1990, 166–67).



The very identity of French actors and thus the French state to some extent depends on the acceptance of the narrative of France being an influential power in the world. To maintain this narrative a policy was wanted that would confirm the discourse and put the French role conception into practice. Thus, when intervening in Mali and the CAR, the Hollande administration was not only saving strangers and contributing to international stability, but was saving its very self-image, which it wishes others to accept. France exists in the international system as a security actor on the African continent, as a democracy promoter and human rights defender that does not shy away from using force when it can help defend the values and ideas to which the polity subscribes. In other words, France's role in the international system is intertwined with Africa's instability. 'Because of the reciprocal character of role relations' France can only be Africa's regional protector as long as African states assume the role of the protectee (Backman 1970, 313). If, one day, African leaders no longer resort to France's assistance in security matters, France's national identity and purpose in the international system will be seriously challenged. At that moment, French actors will enter a time of crisis, as Rosati (2000, 67) postulates, during which a new identity will be forged. Hence, French interventionism in francophone Africa is neither simply a leap back into a colonial relationship of dependency nor is it a leap towards complete disengagement.

Lastly, France's continuous interventionism is both part of and contributes to the prolongation of a long tradition that 'involved the continual objectification of "Africa" as a place where horrendous things happened to benighted people, and where the West could display its full panoply of moral and material powers to positive ends' (Reid 2014, 144). In fact, each French intervention undermines the discourse of the promotion of African-led or other multilateral approaches to Africa's security architecture and thus prolongs a certain type of paternalism to which the majority of African states had been subjected to long after decolonisation.

By analysing the processes that led to the two military interventions in Mali and the CAR respectively, I hope to have qualified the notion of interest, drawn attention to the high degree of complexity behind these decision-making processes, and identified tangible motivations that informed decision-makers in the course of France's latest military interventions in Africa. Given the interactionist nature of foreign policy-making, policy-makers and analysts must pay close attention to the reactions of

different audiences in order to judge the success of a given policy. While I acknowledge the importance of different audiences and particularly the role of regional actors in crisis resolution, future research could provide a more detailed analysis of how foreign policy-makers reacted to French actions, influenced French policy-making, and defined their own role in light of France's interventions.

### ‘It’s the Process Stupid!’ ...and Ideas<sup>486</sup>

In theoretical terms, this project intended to show how a process-oriented analysis in combination with an actor-centred ideational approach to foreign policy analysis can contribute to our understanding of foreign policy-making. To understand foreign policy-making, it has been argued that it is necessary to decipher the actors' psychological environment. A close examination of the process brings out the equifinality of decision-making, that is, the potential existence of several equally (un)likely solutions to the same problem (George and Bennett 2005, 206–7). Such a process-oriented approach emphasises the need to distinguish between policy-making and policy outcomes. By so doing, the study has responded to the quest to bring ‘mechanisms’<sup>487</sup> back into the analysis of international relations and produced a set of explanations that are grounded in empirical reality (Checkel 2005, 14). What happens below the macro-theoretical level of grand theories is more than just noise or décor but instead the very gist of all politics and therefore deserves a more prominent place in policy analyses.

Throughout this work I have emphasised the importance of taking mental maps and heuristic shortcuts serious when analysing foreign policy behaviour. Studies in social psychology found that unlimited choice and opportunity may provoke disappointment and even suffering (Schwartz and Ward 2004; Schwartz 2004). Unlimited choice not only turns individual freedom into an act of condemnation but also leads to paralysis. Only ‘self-determination within significant constraints—within “rules” of some sort—[...] leads to well-being, to optimal functioning’ (Schwartz and Ward 2004, 86). In order to achieve such optimal functioning (or at the very least some functionality), actors rely on heuristic shortcuts or mental maps, as we have seen throughout this work. Close scrutiny of the actors' discourses

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<sup>486</sup> See Checkel 2005.

<sup>487</sup> Defined as links between inputs and outcomes that account for interactions between agents and structure (Checkel 2005, 4).

has corroborated the argument that human beings, as decision-makers, make sense of the operational environment and give meaning to social facts through selective recognition of the totality of available information. This makes humans ‘limited information processors’ (Lau 2003, 29) whose rationality remains bounded at most (Simon 1985). In a world of affluent choice, ideas help decision-makers take action. Beliefs and motives, as Hermann showed, ‘provide political leaders with maps for charting their course, shaping the nature of the leaders’ goals and appropriate strategies for achieving the goals... [they] suggest what is important to the leader’ (Hermann 1987, 165). Walker and Schafer corroborate these findings when arguing ‘that the subjective beliefs held by a leader are the ones that are most likely to influence his/her choice of moves’ (Walker and Schafer 2006, 11). By definition, mental maps simplify reality and give meaning to a contested present and unknown future. As Lebow (2010, 14) states, ‘insight into the future is rooted in our understanding of the past, our socially constructed, psychologically motivated, and ideologically filtered reconstruction of past events and imputation of their “lessons”’. Mental maps can take various forms and formats and are closely related to the actors’ individual and collective experiences. We saw how analogies to Afghanistan increased perceptions of a terrorist threat in the Sahel and likewise how analogies to Rwanda augmented the actors’ willingness to deploy a peacekeeping operation to the CAR in order to halt a genocide. By resorting to counterfactual reasoning, French policy makers had established a truth claim according to which French intervention was imperative in preventing an otherwise inevitable genocide.

The ideational struggles that could be detected during the decision-making processes confirm the core assumptions of social cognition and schema theory. The theory ‘depicts individual belief systems as internally much more fragmented, with different beliefs or schemas being evoked under different situations for making sense of the environment, suggesting a greater likelihood that some beliefs may change over time’ (Rosati 2000, 57). To test this hypothesis, the phenomenon of non-intervention deserves our attention. By analysing processes of non-intervention, one can scrutinise the impact of the same mental maps in light of a fundamentally different outcome. This study briefly elaborated on the non-intervention in the CAR at the beginning of 2013. It would be interesting to apply the same methodology to the non-intervention in Mali in 2012 under the Sarkozy administration, as well as to the ongoing Syrian crisis to further engage in the study of ideational struggles and their potential impacts

on policies.

Cognition and schema theory not only put struggles between competing ideas and belief systems at the centre of their analyses, they also allow for inconsistency in the actors' mind thus discarding the explanation of French security policy towards Africa in terms of a confusion paradigm (Bovcon 2013; Cumming 2013). From the perspective of cognition theory, 'although the beliefs held by an individual may appear inconsistent and contradictory to an outside observer, the overall belief system may be functional within the mind of the individual, indicating a complex and messy cognitive process' (Rosati 2000, 57). While brute facts can exist independently of human actors, social reality cannot.

Taken together, the recognition that processes are open-ended and non-determinate and the finding that policy behaviour depends to a large extent on heuristic shortcuts and a specific set of ideas provide for an interpretation that places ideational struggles at the core of any analysis. In other words, human cognition matters in the making of foreign policy and world politics (Rosati 2000, 47). In this study I have shown how it impacts on decision-making processes in the context of French foreign and security policy. By examining French interventionism in Africa, I found that national interests are neither given nor immutable, but emerge from a process of interpretation, during which 'natural kinds' traverse actors' ideational prisms to become 'social kinds'<sup>488</sup> (Houghton 2007, 29). Social reality and by consequence foreign policy is always an outcome of a struggle between competing ideas. By shedding light on these processes of competition a better understanding of the making of foreign policy has become possible.

The picture that emerges from this project is that of a complex and multifaceted reality. While I am convinced that the present approach positively contributes to our understanding of French security policy in sub-Saharan Africa and can be applied to other instances of foreign policy-making, it is not a panacea to solve all puzzle of foreign policy-making. Clearly, there are limits as to how much we can say about actors' intrinsic motivations by relying on official discourse and interview data. As stated above, we simply do not have a direct access to the actors' minds. Substitute data may be flawed, erroneous, or willingly distorted. By means of triangulation I tried to distinguish between constitutive and instrumental beliefs and thus increase the validity of the interpretations offered in this text. Whilst allowing for a convincing account of the processes that led to the military operations in Mali and CAR,

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<sup>488</sup> For a discussion of the differences between natural and social kinds see (Wendt 1999, 68–71).

one may raise some doubts as to what extent the story told actually *explains* foreign policy decision-making. Claims about causality and generalizations are difficult to achieve and are rejected by the epistemology that has been chosen for this project. Isolating the impact of mental maps and culture on foreign policy-making is extremely difficult—and at times even impossible to achieve. While the multidimensional character and complexity of the interpretation proposed here may limit the study’s explanatory reach, this deficiency also constitutes the approach’s theoretical richness and principal contribution (Stark Urrestarazu 2015, 133). If we acknowledge multidimensional explanations as necessary to understand the complexity of social reality and advance a minimal definition of causes as ‘reasons for action and other constitutive “driving forces”’ (Stark Urrestarazu 2015, 142), the model advanced here seems a promising approach to illuminate the processes and motivations behind France’s latest military interventions on the African continent.

## ‘Making War and Waging Peace’: On Terrorism and Humanitarianism<sup>489</sup>

When the Hollande administration decided on two interventions in Africa, it was acting not in a vacuum but under the influence of and according to the norms and rules of the present-day international system. In Chapter Two, I illuminated the interaction between individual actors and socially constructed knowledge structures. This co-constitution of social reality can be observed by looking at the two leitmotifs that helped actors to justify the respective interventions in Mali and the CAR. In the case of Operation Serval the justification derived from France’s commitment to fight terrorism whilst in the case of Operation Sangaris the responsibility to protect prevailed. Adding to this, the discursive commitment to multilateral solutions being considered the only righteous belligerent action also derives from a collective knowledge structure, according to which supranational organisations enjoy a greater legitimacy than state actors (Claude 1966). In her volume on changing beliefs and their impact on

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<sup>489</sup> See Smock 1993.

foreign intervention, Finnemore provides a succinct list of elements required for an intervention to be defined as humanitarian, thus being considered legitimate in the current context of world politics:

In addition to a shift in normative burdens to act, intervention norms now place strict requirements on the ways humanitarian intervention can be carried out. Humanitarian intervention must be multilateral when it occurs. It must be organized under multilateral, preferably UN, auspices or with explicit multilateral consent. Further, it must be implemented with a multilateral force if at all possible. Specifically the intervention force should contain troops from “disinterested” states, usually middle-level powers outside the region of conflict – another dimension of multilateralism not found in the nineteenth-century practice. (Finnemore 2003, 80)

In both cases, French actors abided by these rules during the agenda setting and early framing process. Multilateralism took precedence over unilateral intervention, with the AU or the UN heralded as leaders of possible intervention forces in both cases. During the decision-making processes leading up to interventions in Mali and the CAR, France spent considerable time and effort lobbying at the UN Security Council and General Assembly. Multilateral consent was considered as the necessary precondition of any action.

As the decision approached, actors had become much more lackadaisical about the golden principles that had dominated the discourse at the outset of the decision-making process. The reasons that explain the French government’s decision to deviate from their initial course have been demonstrated above. Two other points deserve our attention. First, the interventions’ early phases, which had been conducted under French leadership in collaboration with regional partners, were framed as a necessary deviation from the normal course. After French troops had acted as a rapid reaction force (*force de première entrée*) helping to bring the violence to a halt (initially with limited success in the case of the CAR), policy-makers endeavoured to recreate the image of an intervention that corresponded to the characteristics of justified multilateral action. This line of argumentation, buttressed by constructivist scholarship, clearly shows the strong influence of established norms on policy action rather than reflecting the situation on the ground.

Given that rapid interventions by French forces in Africa in the name of regime stability were accepted courses of action until the 1990s, one can point to the malleable nature of norms and their transformation over time. In a sense, the operation in Mali was more than an ephemeral and necessary outbreak from the norm. Small deviations from established rules and norms, as Barnett and Finnemore (1999, 721–22) have shown, can set a precedent and have considerable impact on future action. ‘Over

time, these exceptions can become the rule—they become normal, not exceptions at all: they can become institutionalized to the point where deviance is "normalized" (1999, 722). The French intervention in Mali has been celebrated as a successful and efficient operation against terrorist forces and has received the approval and plaudits of the vast majority of actors in the international system. Although such quasi-unilateral intervention with neighbouring states implicated at the conflict's frontline contradicts the principle of multilateral intervention as outlined above, the triumph of the former type of intervention could lead to a gradual institutionalisation of this practice, thus potentially emerging as a normal procedure in the future. Operations conducted by one actor or a small group of actors acting in the name of the larger international community—due to their superior efficiency—could be considered as legitimate practice of multilateral intervention. France's attempts to deduct the costs of external military operations from the EU budget calculations are a first step in this direction. In the wake of the intervention in Mali, French actors publicly claimed to have acted in the name of the EU. They purported that not only should their action be considered as legitimate, but also that other member states should contribute to the operation's costs. If and when such contracted interventionism actually will become a future norm remains to be seen.

Global security agendas and international norms co-determine what becomes a threat and what does not. Similar to issue-specific mental maps, these macro-maps or norms emerge from ideational struggles between competing ideas and actors in the international system. Generally speaking, they are long-term procedures and therefore enjoy a highly developed level of social capital, that is, acceptance among the different actors. Consequently, they are rarely questioned. As Bigo argues, even after a process of institutionalisation these norms remain inherently political: 'Labels like terrorism, human trafficking, economic refugee, and national security, even when sanctified by social sciences and transformed by lawyers into judicial categories, are not scholarly concepts or thinking tools but instruments of a politics of (in)security (Bigo and Hermant 1986)' (Bigo 2011, 230–31). Once institutionalised, they prove particularly resilient and influence the way actors think about the operational environment that surrounds them. Long before the establishment of international relations as a discipline and emergence of constructivism as one of the dominating schools of thought, Neapolitan philosopher, historian, and jurist Giambattista Vico ([1710]1982, 55) drew his readers' attention to the fact that 'the criterion and rule of

the true is to have made it'. To critically scrutinize truth constructions by those social agents endowed with the necessary capital to create and shape collective narratives has always been and should always remain one of the principal contributions of social sciences.



# Appendixes

## *Appendix One:*

### Primary Sources According to Document Type

|                        | <b>CAR</b> | <b>Mali</b> |
|------------------------|------------|-------------|
| Official declarations  | 24         | 68          |
| Press conferences      | 143        | 83          |
| Speeches               | 99         | 73          |
| Official Interviews    | 56         | 51          |
| Parliamentary Hearings | 39         | 17          |
| Parliamentary Reports  | 0          | 1           |
| Op-eds                 | 4          | 1           |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>365</b> | <b>294</b>  |

## *Appendix Two:*

### List of Interviews

1. Roland Marchal, researcher at Sciences Po, interview by author, Paris, 27 May 2013.
2. Yves Gounin, privy counsellor, phone interview by author, Paris, 26 June 2013.
3. Stéphane Gompertz, ambassador, phone interview by author, Vienna, 5 July 2013.
4. Interview with policy officer at the Ministry of Defence, Paris, 10 July 2013.
5. Interview with senior civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 18 July 2013.
6. Camille Grand, director at the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, interview by author, Paris, 23 July 2013.
7. Xavier Collignon, vice-director of the DAS, interview by author, Paris, 6 August 2013.
8. Isabelle Lasserre, journalist at Le Monde, interview by author, Paris, 23 August 2013.
9. General Eric Bonnemaïson, director of the DAS, interview by author, Paris, 27 August 2013.
10. Cyrille Le Déaut, policy advisor at the French embassy, interview by author, Paris, 30 August 2013.
11. Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 16 September 2013.
12. Niagalé Bagayoko-Penone, policy advisor at the Francophonie organisation, interview by author, Paris, 20 September 2013.
13. Interview with a project officer at Francophonie organisation, Paris, 1 October 2013.
14. Romain Nadal, former spokesperson of François Hollande, interview by author, Paris, 7 October 2013.
15. Jeanny Lorgeoux, senator, interview by author, Paris, 5 December 2013.
16. Interview with a researcher at the French Ministry of Defence, Paris, 19 December 2013.
17. Michel Goya, colonel, interview by author, Paris, 10 January 2014.
18. Vincent Desportes, general in the French Army, interview by author, Paris, 12 January 2014.
19. Frédéric Charillon, director of the IRSEM, interview by author, Paris, 17 January 2014.
20. Interview with personal advisor to the minister of defence, Paris, 27 January 2014.
21. Interview with personal advisor to the foreign minister, Paris, 31 January 2014.
22. Interview with civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 3 February 2014.
23. Interview with civil servant at the Foreign Ministry, Paris, 5 February 2014.
24. Pierre Lellouche, MP, interview by author, Paris, 7 February 2014.
25. Interview with personal advisor to the minister of the interior, Paris, 12 February 2014.
26. Interview with policy officer at the DCSD, Paris, 18 February 2014.
27. Didier Castres, vice chief of staff, interview by author, Paris, 18 February 2014.
28. Oumar Keita, spokesperson of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, interview by author, 22 February 2014.
29. Pouria Amirshahi, MP, interview by author, Paris, 24 February 2014.
30. Interview with author and expert on French military questions, Paris, 25 February 2014.
31. Interview with personal advisor to the president, Paris, 16 March 2014.
32. Interview with a researcher and specialist on the CAR, 19 December 2014.

## Appendix Three:

### Military operations in the CAR with French troop involvement

| Date                       | Name   | Objectives  |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Sept. 1979 – Sept. 1981    | Operation Barracuda  | Deposition of Emperor Bokassa I and re-installation of David Dacko, protection of French expatriates, stopping Libyan troops from occupying Bouar   |
| Sept. 1981 – 1998          | EFAO (Éléments français d'assistance opérationnelle)                 | Pre-positioned French forces (forces pré-positionnées) in support of the FACA (Forces armées centrafricaines), permanent military presence also used as starting point for numerous interventions across the region, such as in Chad, Zaire, Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, or Rwanda  |
| April 1996                 | Furet/Almandin I   | Repeated mutinies on the part of some elements of the FACA against the government between 1996 and 1998 trigger military operations Almandin I – III. The missions supported the EFAO and involved up to 2.300 troops. The support to President Ange-Félix Patassé, the protection of French expatriates and the securitisation of strategic points (such as the airport, or main roads) are among the principal tasks of the French troops. After an intensification of the violence and the death of two French soldiers in January 1997, Almandin III was launched, involving armoured vehicles and air support. |
| May 1996 – June 1997       | Almandin II  |   |
| June 1997-April 1998       | Almandin III   |   |
| February 1997              | MISAB (Mission Interafricaine de Surveillance des Accords de Bangui) | 790 African troops with logistical and financial support by France were mandated to restore peace and security by monitoring the implementation of the Bangui Agreements (peace agreement between the forces loyal to President Patassé and the rebels). During occasional peaks of violence French troops intervened directly (Mission Bubale, and with troops from Operation Almandin).   |
| April 1998 – February 2000 | MINURCA (Mission de maintien de la paix des Nations Unies en RCA)    | In light of the financial and logistical constraints of the MISAB and France's decision to retreat from the CAR by reducing its troops in the country to 300, UN Resolution 1159 (1998) established the MINURCA. French troops supported the UN mission until they were replaced by Egyptian forces in February 1999.   |
| Oct. 1997 – April 1998     | Cigogne  | Support the retreat of EFAO troops.   |
| 2000                       | Operation Murène   | 33 troops to protect the French embassy   |
| March 2003 - present       | Boali  | After an agreement between François Bozizé and Jacques Chirac, the French government launches Operation Boali to support FACA and FOMUC troops. Boali has comprised between 200 and 500 troops and has been part of RECAMP. French troops intervene against UFDR rebels in 2006 and 2007, leading to another peace agreement between the CAR government and the rebel.  |
| March 2008 – March 2009    | EUFOR Chad/CAR   | EU mission to protect civilians (refugees), facilitate aid deliveries, and ensure the security of UN staff. The operation was coordinated from the headquarters in France, which with 2,500 out of 3,700 troops was the largest contributor.  |
| December 2013 – present    | Operation Sangaris   | Peacekeeping operation to inhibit violent clashes between former Seleka elements and anti-balaka fighters, protect French expatriates and the Central African population, prevent a civil war and allow for the UN peacekeeping operation to restore order and the rule of law.   |

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