

**SAHEL:** 19 February 2021  
**FRANCE RESHAPES SECURITY ENGAGEMENT WITH TASK FORCE TAKUBA**

France has signalled that a shift is underway in its strategic approach in the Sahel, with the establishment of Task Force Takuba pointing towards the adoption of a lighter military footprint and a greater reliance on European security partners. However, this change is unlikely to have a meaningful impact on deteriorating security conditions across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

On 19 January 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron stated that France was looking to “adjust” its operations in the Sahel in the wake of successes against Islamist militants and greater security engagement in the region by other European states. The statement immediately prompted fears of an imminent French military withdrawal, which would leave beleaguered regional security forces and UN troops to tackle the region’s escalating security crisis alone.

Macron appeared cognisant of the impact of the statement, and one month later, in addressing regional heads of state during the G5 Sahel Summit in Chad, the French president sought to reiterate that France would remain committed to attaining security in the region and assured them that there would be no immediate drawdown of French troops. However, despite Macron’s reassurances, over the past year France has clearly indicated its intent to shift to a more minimalistic operational model in the Sahel, placing an increased emphasis on the employment of small detachments of European special operations forces (SOF) to support security operations by regional security partners, decreasing the burden on the 5,100 French troops deployed to Operation Barkhane. Chad announced it would deploy 1,200 troops to the tri-border region between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the epicentre of attacks in the Sahel, to complement the Barkhane counter-terrorism force.

A day after Macron’s statements at the Chad conference, suspected Islamist militants killed at least 18 people in attacks in northern Burkina Faso and central Mali. Since the start of the year, over 150 civilians have been killed by militants in the three countries, including 100 in an attack on two villages in Niger in early January. As violence continues to escalate across the Sahel region, PANGEA-RISK assesses the impact of these developments on the broader security environment and the outlook for commercial operations in the Sahel.

**French disengagement becomes inevitable**

Over the past year, French forces and their regional allies have accomplished a range of tactical successes in the Sahel, including the killing on 3 June 2020 of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb leader, Abdelmalek Droukdal, during a French-led military operation in Mali’s Kidal region. Co-ordination with regional security forces has improved significantly, resulting in several successful joint offensives in critical areas. For instance, in January 2021 a French-Malian joint operation in central Mali reportedly resulted in the killing of at least 100 militants and the capture of 20 others, alongside the recovery of a significant amount of materiel and equipment.



However, any claims of broader strategic successes in the Sahel have not been borne out by the facts on the ground. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, over 2020 there were 1,170 violent events and 4,122 associated fatalities linked to Islamist militant groups in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali. This marks a 44 percent increase in the number of incidents compared to the previous year, as well as a 57 percent increase in the number of fatalities. As recently as 3 January 2021, at least 100 people were killed in a suspected militant attack on two villages in the Tillabéri region in western Niger.

This deterioration underlines the temporary nature of any tactical successes. Under pressure from intensive counter-insurgency operations, militants have simply escaped to other areas, returning after security forces leave.

**Mounting expeditionary costs**



FRENCH SOLDIERS OF THE OPERATION BARKHANE

With little to show for over seven years of military operations, France’s security engagement in the Sahel has come under significant political pressure in the last two years, both within the region and at home. Over 2019 and 2020, 27 French troops were killed during operations in the Sahel, almost half the total number of deaths suffered by French forces in the region since 2013. The financial cost of Barkhane has also steadily climbed, estimated at USD 1.1 billion in 2020 alone. French politicians have correspondingly labelled the cost of the intervention as “too great” and a public opinion survey conducted in France in early January showed that 51 percent of respondents disapproved of Operation Barkhane.

At the same time, negative sentiment towards Operation Barkhane within the Sahelian states has grown rapidly over recent years, with local critiques of the French presence ranging from the perceived failure of Barkhane to protect civilian populations, to the role of the military intervention in furthering France’s alleged neo-colonial ambitions. This impression has been helped little by allegations of civilian deaths at the hands of French forces. Most recently, a public outcry and demands for investigations followed reports that 19 civilians were killed in a French air strike on 3 January, which allegedly hit a wedding party in a village in northern Mali. Such incidents have contributed to a surge in calls for an end to the foreign military presence in the region, driving recurrent protests over 2020 and the beginning of 2021 in the capitals of Mali and Niger (see ANTI-FRENCH SENTIMENT IN AFRICA: HOW AN ESCALATION IN GLOBAL POLITICS COULD AFFECT FRENCH CITIZENS AND ASSETS ACROSS THE CONTINENT).



OPERATION TAKUBA SOLDIERS IN THE SAHEL

**Enter Task Force Takuba**

Under these conditions, France has taken steps to shift its engagement in the region from a unilateral to multilateral framework, ostensibly with the aim of alleviating political pressure back home, as well as to recover some semblance of legitimacy for French operations in the region.

The central component of this shift is the establishment of the French-led Task Force Takuba. Comprised of European SOF, Takuba falls under the operational umbrella of Operation Barkhane, and is intended to focus on the Liptako-Gourma region, which borders Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Takuba’s primary role is to advise and assist regional security forces during joint operations, as well as to maintain a rapid incident response capability and conduct direct action operations against those militant groups which have exploited the porous borders of the Liptako-Gourma and threaten all three Sahelian states. In November, Takuba carried out its first operation in the Mali-Burkina Faso border area.

While European states have been typically slow to commit to other security initiatives in the region, Takuba has received extensive pledges of support, including from Estonia, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Portugal. In early February, military sources confirmed that Swedish SOF were already deployed in Liptako-Gourma, and that a full complement of 150 Swedish troops would join Takuba by the end of the month. Some 200 Italian SOF personnel are also scheduled to deploy to the mission in March, while Greece, Hungary, and Ukraine have recently reportedly expressed firm interest in contributing personnel and are expected to send troops to Takuba in the coming months.

**Partnerships with regional security forces remain problematic**



EUTM TRAINING MISSION IN MALI

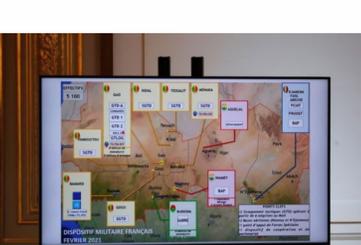
With French forces moving towards the adoption of a leaner and more stripped-back operational model, the burden of carrying out large-scale counter-insurgency operations will increasingly fall on regional security forces. However, these forces continue to demonstrate little capability to operate independently, and efforts to build capability and capacity by Western security partners have repeatedly fallen short of the mark.

Notably, the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM), the longest-standing security assistance element in the region, has been increasingly viewed as a failure by European policymakers and regional security analysts. Despite over 15,000 of the Malian military’s 16,500 personnel having passed through EUTM training courses since 2013, the Malian security forces remain largely incapable of holding terrain in the face of jihadist offensives, and recurrent reports of desertions and the selling of issued weapons and ammunition continue to emerge. In August 2020, the Malian coup d’état drove home the inability of security assistance efforts to transform the institutional character of the Malian military, as European governments were forced to recognise that several of the coup leaders had received recent military training in Germany and France (see MALI: ARMY DOMINANCE OF POST-COUP GOVERNMENT REDUCES CHANCE OF TALKS WITH JIHADISTS).

Neither has there been much progress on pulling together any kind of regional military response. The G5 Sahel Joint Force, comprising troops from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, remains under-funded and ill-equipped, and its member states lack the political will to see the force come to full fruition. These issues have been compounded in the past year, as state budgets have been strained by the COVID-19 pandemic, limiting the number of resources available for regional security initiatives.

Under pressure to prioritise domestic security and social needs, the G5 states have not been forthcoming with contributions for the joint force, preferring to allocate resources to national-level counter-terrorism initiatives. For instance, a year after Chad committed to send a battalion to Liptako-Gourma, the deployment has yet to materialise, while Chad has instead increased the tempo of internal operations in the Lake Chad area, bordering Nigeria and Niger.

Even where regional security forces have successfully engaged in clearance operations, they face widespread distrust over a growing record of human rights violations. In February 2021, Human Rights Watch released a report alleging that over 600 civilians were subjected to extrajudicial executions by regional security forces in the Sahel since 2019. Most of these killings appear to have taken place in retribution for the deaths of security forces personnel at the hands of militants, where local communities were perceived as complicit in jihadist attacks.



STATE OF FRENCH FORCES IN THE SAHEL IN FEBRUARY 2021

Such incidents drastically undermine counter-insurgency efforts, making attempts to establish state-administered governance structures in newly cleared areas more likely to meet with resistance from local communities. In turn, this creates significant opportunities for jihadists to recruit from marginalised and insecure areas, opening spaces for militants to provide alternative governance frameworks where the state presence is sufficiently resented. Militant groups in the Sahel have repeatedly proven adept at exploiting governance gaps to leverage support from local communities by providing both a nominal degree of security and a basic degree of service provision. In particular, unaddressed inter-communal and ethnic conflicts in areas of low state presence create ideal conditions for militants to step in and offer protection to vulnerable communities.

**INSIGHT**

The creation and prioritisation of Task Force Takuba indicates that there has been little change in the overall strategic orientation of regional states and their Western security partners in the Sahel, which remains overtly focused on military solutions at the expense of broad social, economic, and political issues. While the presence of additional SOF personnel as front-line mentors is likely to serve as a force multiplier for regional security forces, contributing to further tactical successes, it will not address this strategic deficit.

As such, the success of future counter-insurgency operations will continue to be limited by both the ability of regional security forces to secure and hold territory following clearance operations, as well as the ability of the state to extend governance structures and service delivery into marginalised regions. This means that the underlying conditions which foster the expansion of the militant threat are unlikely to be resolved, making it likely that the security situation across the Sahel will continue to deteriorate in the coming months.

Under these conditions, regional states are likely to increasingly push for talks with the militants. However, the sustained focus of Western security partners on kinetic counter-terrorism operations means that regional states are unlikely to find much international backing for dialogue initiatives. European security priorities revolve primarily around suppressing and containing militant activity, and there are considerable fears that some kind of peace agreement might provide breathing room that militants would exploit to further entrench their presence in areas of low governance.

Deteriorating security conditions will correspond with a steadily increasing threat posed to foreign commercial operations in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Mines, as well as oil and gas sites in peripheral and isolated regions, particularly near the borders of the three states, face combined threats of armed assault and kidnapping posed by Islamist militants and criminal groups alike.

The shift to a multilateral engagement model is also unlikely to be sufficient to change the negative perception of foreign military operations in the region. Conversely, while resentment of the foreign security presence has thus far been focused almost entirely upon France and the US, the arrival of other European force contingents creates broader anti-European sentiment of development, particularly if European SOF are implicated in any human rights abuses. Related protests are likely to take place in the Sahelian capitals of Niamey, Ouagadougou, and Bamako. Such protests may target European embassies and may well be directed at foreign commercial entities or foreign nationals connected with the European states participating in Task Force Takuba.