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IN FOCUS

End of Operation Barkhane

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Regional | Economy | Gender | Climate Change | Migration | Peace and Conflict |
International | Sports



COMMENTARY

End of Operation Barkhane, and future implications for France and Sahel

France's withdrawal from Sahel points to a combination of factors including misunderstanding of local power dynamics, operational failures leading to inefficiency, overwhelmingly militarised approach of France and various political mistakes which will have significant implications in Sahel as well as France's relations with Africa.

Poulomi Mondal



Image source: Reuters

On 9 November, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the official end of Operation Barkhane in his keynote speech during his trip to the Toulon naval base where he presented a New National Strategic Review (RNS).

Referring to the recent backlashes against the European and mainly French forces in the Sahel region, he said that the decision was a “consequence of what we have experienced’ in recent months and there would be a strategy overhaul to be worked with the African counterparts within the next six months. This announcement marked the end of a counter-terrorism operation that began in January 2013 in Mali with the launch of Operation Serval, later renamed as Barkhane. This also sees the end of a transition withdrawal of the French troops from Mali which began in August 2021.

Four major factors behind the termination

First, breakdown of Franco-Malian relations. Operation Barkhane became the longest French overseas military operation after the Algerian war. It had up to 5,500 soldiers deployed in the Sahel-Sahara zone of Africa (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania). Operation Barkhane and the Takuba Taskforce jointly worked on local counterterrorism in Mali’s Gao, Timbuktu, Kidal, Gossi, Menaka, and Ansongo. In August 2021, the French military bases were evacuated in Kidal, Tessalit and Timbuktu following Mali’s allegations against alleged French interference in the 2021 military coup. The International Strategic Research Institute of Military School says disinformation campaigns on social media amplified these alleged involvements and led to the breakdown of Franco-Malian relations.

Second, failure of counter-terrorism efforts. The beginning of Operation Serval and later Barkhane saw significant success in terms of their objectives in ousting Islamic militants from Northern Mali and liberation of nearly half of the country which had been overrun by extremists in a few months. The tactical success of the operation was evident in the killings of high-profile extremist leaders such as Abdel Malek Droukdel and Bah Ag Moussa; this was later overshadowed by France’s irrefutable failures to curb extremism in Mali after 2014. In addition to

the failures, the lack of local support for the presence of a former colonial power in the country led to widening of the rift between France and the Sahel countries which feel these foreign military operations are a part of neo-colonial mindsets with no considerable results.

Third, domestic instability in the region. During the announcement of the termination, President Macron mentions the perpetuating domestic-political instability in the region. In case of Mali, the country saw a military coup in 2020 and 2021 and suffers from a lack of stable governance as well as the resource crisis akin to all Sahel nations. Similarly, Chad is facing violent political protests by the opposition party leaving heavy civilian casualties, meanwhile Burkina Faso stands amidst its second coup in two years with a clear lack of military leadership resulting in failure of having a transitional government for national stability.

Fourth, the Russian factor. The presence of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner group to fill the growing dissatisfaction against the European and the UN operations in the region, brings geopolitics at the helm of the issue. These mercenaries have also been linked with several attacks on civilians in areas under strong Islamist control. According to data by the NGO Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), as many as 456 civilians were killed in nine incidents surrounding the Wagner group and the Malian authorities between January to April 2022. The investigations for the Moura massacre also reveal the alleged involvement of the Group killing around 380 people in a four-day period. In 2021, Russian foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov publicly acknowledged the presence of the Wagner group for commercial purposes in Mali, but the group

seemed to be called in for “missed missions” with the Malian soldiers after striking a deal with the new military rulers.

What are the implications for Sahel?

Looking at the case study of Afghanistan as a country where withdrawal of dated military operations led to the immediate takeover by Taliban, similar concerns of heightened extremist resurgences lie ahead for the Sahel region. The Sahel is vulnerable to decades of activities of terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, ISIS and al Shabaab alongside several local and splinter terrorist organizations in several regions. The International Crisis Group further revealed that violence linked with groups like Jama’at Nasr al-Islam Muslimim (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) rose 70 per cent in 2021 as compared to 2020, emphasising on the “hegemonic presence” of JNIM in many central and northern parts of Mali. Therefore, the decrease in military pressure comes as the militancy is on the rise in Mali and shows the highest probability of surge after the withdrawal, threatening the security of the entire region. Additionally, the targeted attacks on Islamic establishments by mercenaries might further aggravate the Islamic militancy in these countries.

What are the implications for France?

Firstly, while the end of the operation comes with the complete withdrawal of forces from Mali, 3,000 soldiers are to be stationed at Chad and Niger. Additionally, in recent times, France seems to be shifting its counter-terrorism efforts to Western African countries like the presence of permanent personnel stationed in Cote d’Ivoire and Senegal. France has a solid and long-standing presence in the West African coast to fight against al-Qaeda or Islamic State, which can pave the way for France to

extend its monitoring capabilities to the larger region.

Secondly, the withdrawal of French forces might also lead to the downsizing of a number of personnel in the Takuba taskforce pioneered by the European nations jointly for combating local terrorism, but clearly failing to achieve any substantial results. This can leave a larger void for non-state actors and reduce accountability of the alleged involvement of the Russian mercenaries which can aggravate the already worsening security condition of the region.

Thirdly, the overhaul, as promised by Macron can be in the form of the G5 Sahel Joint Force. A regional counter-terrorism task force comprised of military personnel from the Sahelian states as well as the French military to involve all the stakeholders and attempt to gain local

legitimacy for an effective counter-terrorism operation.

Failure of France in Mali and largely in Sahel is due to a combination of factors including misunderstanding of local power dynamic, operational failures leading to inefficiency and various political mistakes. Moreover, it is largely the overwhelmingly militarized approach of France towards the region due to assumption of terrorism solely to be the root cause of instability, and not accounting for governance failures or the resource scarcity which often are the reasons of failing democratization of the region. Therefore, the proposed overhaul of the counter-terrorism plans of France needs to take in account the ground realities and be inclusive of the regional players for effective governance and facilitator of growth and security in the region.

*(*This commentary was previously published in NIAS-IPRI-KAS Conflict Weekly 150th issue)*

AFRICA IN BRIEF

29 November - 5 December

By Anu Maria Joseph and Apoorva Sudhakar

SUDAN

Military signs agreement for a civilian transition

On 5 December, Sudan's pro-democracy coalition Forces of Freedom and Change signed an agreement with the military to restore civilian rule. The deal agreed for a two-year civilian-led transition which would lead to an election. However, protests were sparked in capital Khartoum challenging the agreement and calling the military to be accountable for the coup as well as the death of anti-coup protesters. The deal doesn't cover security reforms leaving public concern that it would leave the military powerful and disrupt the democratic transition. A spokesperson for the Forces of Freedom and Change said: "The goals of the agreement are establishing a fully civilian authority, creating a free climate for politics, and reaching a final agreement with the widest political participation." The African Union, Arab nations and western countries have been putting pressure on both sides for negotiation. Meanwhile, the UN and the US have welcomed the agreement. ("[Sudan military to sign deal on return to civilian rule](#)," *BBC*, 5 December 2022)

SOUTH SUDAN

Expel officials linked to sexual violence, recommends UN panel

On 29 November, BBC reported that the chairperson of the panel investigating sexual violence in South Sudan called on the government to prosecute the officials, including state governors and county commissioners, involved in the crime. The news report quoted the chairperson: "Nowhere in the world do you find so many women who experience conflict by being

repeatedly gang raped... while the men responsible are promoted and rewarded." Another panel member said the "dehumanising sexual violence" in South Sudan in 2022 was a culmination of the government's "failure over many years to hold individuals accountable." (Nichola Mandil, "[South Sudan urged to prosecute officials linked to rape](#)," *BBC*, 29 November 2022)

ETHIOPIA

Humanitarian aid reaching only "tiny percentage," says WHO

On 2 December, the World Health Organization said that it was only able to help a "tiny percentage" of those in urgent need of humanitarian aid in Tigray a month after a ceasefire agreement was agreed. A BBC report said, Tigrayan fighters have started to withdraw its troops from the major conflict regions and that their representatives are discussing with the government on disarmament. Meanwhile, aid workers say that Eritrean troops and Ethiopian regional militias are continuing to kill and abuse civilians in the region. ("['Tiny percentage' get aid as Tigray access still blocked - WHO](#)," *BBC*, 2 December 2022)

In forum for internet governance, minister says no timelines for restoring services in Tigray

On 29 November, the minister for innovation and technology said there was no timeline to restore internet access to Tigray. The minister made the remark at the UN Annual Internet Governance Forum in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa, with the theme "universal, affordable and meaningful connectivity." However, Prime Minister

Abiy Ahmed justified the shutdown and said the internet services in Tigray had fuelled the conflict through disinformation. The shutdown in Tigray is the longest uninterrupted one since it was imposed in November 2020. (“No timeline’ for restoring internet to Tigray: Ethiopia minister,” *Al Jazeera*, 30 November 2022)

SOMALIA

At least 40 al Shabaab members killed, says government

On 1 December, the government said 40 al Shabaab terrorists had been killed by security forces in the Middle Shabelle region. The information ministry said this was part of a planned operation in the region. However, al Shabaab dismissed the claim and said the fighting ensued from an attack by its fighters. The development comes after al Shabaab took a hotel under siege on 27 November in Mogadishu. In August, the Somali government announced a full fledged campaign against al-Shabab. Despite a major development, the militant group had been carrying out a series of attacks in central and southern Somalia. (“Somalia says around 40 al Shabaab fighters killed in clashes,” *Reuters*, 1 December 2022, “Somalia kills 40 militants in occupied territory - government,” *BBC*, 2 December 2022)

SOUTH AFRICA

Panel submits report to Speaker on Ramaphosa’s farm scandal

On 30 November, an independent panel investigating a crime cover-up at President Cyril Ramaphosa’s private game farm submitted its findings to the National Assembly speaker. The panel, constituted in September, investigated the theft of USD four million at the game farm in 2020 and its cover-up; the findings place Ramaphosa at the risk of an impeachment. Ramaphosa acknowledged the theft but denied any role

in covering it up. The panel’s finding said Ramaphosa violated his oath of office; however, he said: “I categorically deny that I have violated this oath in any way, and I similarly deny that I am guilty of any of the allegations made against me.” (“South Africa panel files report on Ramaphosa farm scandal,” *Al Jazeera*, 30 November 2022; Wendell Roelf and Bhargav Acharya, “Report finds South Africa’s Ramaphosa violated oath of office,” *Reuters*, 1 December 2022)

Ramaphosa legally challenges corruption report

On 5 December, South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa legally challenged the report by a parliamentary commission of inquiry which claims to have evidence for Ramaphosa’s misconduct and possible violation of the constitution. Ramaphosa’s spokesperson described the report as “clearly flawed.” Ramaphosa mentioned that he wants the Constitutional Court to declare the report unlawful and to set them aside. He also added that the inquiry panel went beyond its scope when looking at whether it was a case of robbery at his Phala Phala farm. (“Ramaphosa challenges corruption report in court,” *BBC*, 5 December 2022)

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Army accuses M23 rebels of killing 50 civilians

On 2 December, the Congolese army released a statement accusing M23 rebels of killing 50 civilians in the eastern town of Kishishe. Further, the statement said the army had maintained the ceasefire despite attacks on government positions. However, the rebel group has denied the allegations as “baseless” and said that they never targeted civilians. The accusation comes following the report of resumption of fighting and mass killing collapsing the ceasefire agreement signed the previous week.

Thousands of people are being displaced as the fight between the rebels, government forces and allied militias in different parts of North Kivu province resumed. (“DR Congo army accuses rebels of killing 50 civilians,” *BBC*, 2 December 2022, “DR Congo army accuses M23 rebels of killing 50 civilians,” *Al Jazeera*, 1 December 2022)

INTERNATIONAL

The Netherlands releases Russian fertiliser shipment bound for Africa

On 29 November, the first shipment of Russian fertiliser with 20,000 tonnes of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium left for Africa from the Netherlands after ensuring that Western sanctions do not block it. A spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General said the shipment is part of a series of exports to Africa “to alleviate the humanitarian needs and prevent catastrophic crop loss on the African continent, where it is currently planting season.” The shipment was previously blocked by the Netherlands claiming that an individual in the Russian fertiliser company had been under sanctions. The Dutch approved the export after the UN assured them that the ship would be sent to Malawi and that the individual and the company would not acquire any benefit. (“First shipment of Russian fertiliser en

route to Africa,” *Al Jazeera*, 30 November 2022)

South Korea to export first batch of mpox vaccines to Africa

On 29 November, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) released a press statement announcing that South Korea would donate a first batch of mpox vaccines to Africa. The donation would take place under the MoU signed in April 2022 between the Africa CDC and Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) on public health activities and expansion of global health security to enhance disease prevention in Africa. On 1 December, *Al Jazeera* reported that 50,000 doses of the mpox vaccine will be delivered under the scheme. On 28 November, the World Health Organization announced that the disease, previously called monkeypox, will henceforth be called mpox to avoid racist and stigmatised notions. (“The Republic of Korea to Donate First Batch of Mpox Vaccine to Africa,” *Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention*, 29 November 2022; “Africa to receive first batch of 50,000 mpox vaccines,” *Al Jazeera*, 1 December 2022)

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About NIAS Africa Studies

As a part of the area studies initiatives, the Institute started a focussed study on Pakistan in 2020. In 2021, it expanded the area studies to include Europe Studies, China Reader, and Maritime Studies. In 2022, the Science, Technology and International Relations (STIR) programme at the Institute is further expanding its area studies, to include Africa.

The primary focus of NIAS Africa studies would be on the following five verticals: contemporary political issues, colonial legacies, problems of governance, civil-military equations, and the rise of radical Islamic groups. The primary objective is to study Africa from an internal prism. ,

NIAS Africa Studies would include a series of expert lectures, workshops, publications and a weekly exclusively focussed on Africa. The initiative also aims to create a network of young scholars studying Africa and also African scholars studying in various Indian institutions.

About the team

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