



# FRANCE'S WAR IN THE SAHEL AND THE EVOLUTION OF COUNTER- INSURGENCY DOCTRINE

Michael Shurkin





Criticism of French military operations in the Sahel region of Africa raises questions about the French army's heritage of colonial and counter-insurgency (COIN) operations and its relevance today. The French army is heir to practices and doctrines that originated in 19th-century colonial operations and the Cold War. Common features of French approaches have been a de-emphasis on military operations and the need for a population-centric focus that emphasizes economic, psychological, and political actions intended to shore up the legitimacy of the colonial political order. After the conclusion of the Algerian War in 1962, the French maintained some of these practices while slowly adapting to the post-colonial political context. Operation Barkhane, which began in 2014, reflects that new doctrine, meaning that the French military is limiting itself to focusing on security in the anticipation that others will do the political work. This is complicated by the fact that the French presence constitutes a political intervention, even as the French strive to avoid political interference.

**O**n Jan. 23, 2020, Gen. François Lecointre, chief of the defense staff and France's highest-ranking general, told the National Assembly that the French army knew what it was doing with Operation Barkhane, the French military intervention in the Sahel that began in 2014. This was partly due, he explained, to the fact that the army could draw on the heritage of colonial-era doctrine personified by Gen. Joseph Gallieni and Gen. Hubert Lyautey. These men made their careers conquering and "pacifying" France's colonial empire in Indochina and Africa during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Their ideas were the basis for doctrinal developments in the 1940s and 1950s, when colonial wars evolved into counter-insurgency campaigns and colonial doctrine became

counter-insurgency (COIN) doctrine.<sup>1</sup> For Lecointre, the association between contemporary French military operations and French colonial practices was a positive one. He hoped to communicate confidence and cultivate the trust of the French public and France's civilian leaders, assuring them that the French military mission in the Sahel was justified and its objectives attainable.

For some, Lecointre's remarks had the opposite effect. He confirmed the idea that France was conducting a colonial campaign — that it was approaching Africa through a (neo)colonial lens and not, as the French government claims, merely defending friendly countries from Islamist terrorists. Critics of French interventions in Africa such as Bruno Charbonneau stress the continuities be-

1 "Général d'armée François Lecointre — Audition Assemblée nationale," *Sabre-et-Esprit*, Jan. 23, 2020, <http://sabre-et-esprit-au-combat.over-blog.com/2020/01/general-d-armee-francois-lecointre-audition-assemblee-nationale.html>.

tween colonial, neo-colonial, and contemporary policies and practices.<sup>2</sup> Other regional experts like Yvan Guichaoua and Nathaniel Powell are troubled by the repetition of policies and practices that have, in their view, done more to destabilize the region since decolonization in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the problem is not that the French military does not know what it is doing, but rather that France's track record suggests the country's *savoir faire* is doing more harm than good.

There is also a widespread belief that the French approach to the Sahel is overly militarized. In March 2020, Hannah Armstrong, a senior analyst with International Crisis Group, told the *New York Times* that "French counterterrorism mimics U.S. counterterrorism of 15 years ago." Operation Barkhane was doomed to follow the course of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. According to Armstrong, sooner or later, the French will realize the war is a lost cause and leave.<sup>4</sup> Alex Thurston has argued that "French policy seems to lack a vision beyond the theory that eventually, killing enough terrorists and undertaking enough development projects will eliminate the jihadist presence."<sup>5</sup> Charbonneau has taken issue with France's application of the "global approach," which he associates with actions that negatively impact Malian politics and society.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, most agree that, in Thurston's words, "France is not succeeding at stabilizing the Sahel."<sup>7</sup>

As someone who has followed the Sahel closely for over a decade, I tend to agree with the authors cited above. However, as someone who also studies the French military and French military doctrine as well as COIN, I cannot help but notice that all of the opinions above, including those of Lecointre, reflect assumptions about the colonial and Cold War heritage of contemporary French military doctrine, as well as assumptions regarding current French policy in the Sahel. The French cannot be following in Lyautey's footsteps and mimicking American counter-terrorism at the same time. Charbonneau's

and Thurston's characterizations of the French approach are not consistent with COIN doctrine as it is usually imagined. Unless, of course, Lecointre is wrong and the French are not drinking from their institutional well of COIN experience. This creates more questions: What are the French doing? What doctrine are they applying?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the French military's COIN doctrine and practices as they have evolved from their 19th-century origins to the present day. I wish to examine French strategy in the Sahel, and specifically Operation Barkhane, in light of the evolution of French doctrine and practice. Much of the story of French COIN is familiar to Americans because of U.S. interest in the subject after 2003, when they viewed it as a model for U.S. counter-insurgency operations.<sup>8</sup> There are, however, certain aspects that Americans have overlooked, and in any case, the evolution of French doctrine after the end of the Algerian War in 1962 is largely unknown in the United States. The differences between the French colonial/Cold War doctrine and its post-Algeria variants boil down to the fact that French COIN doctrine from Gallieni to David Galula was a *colonial* tool. The point was to stay, to rule. Contemporary COIN is *post-colonial*. The objective is not to stick around but, on the contrary, to leave as soon as possible. One advertises one's transience. In the former case, a country intervenes militarily in a territory under its sovereignty to shore up its own legitimacy. In the latter, a country intervenes in another country not under its sovereignty to help *that* country shore up its own legitimacy — or more abstractly, to shore up the legitimacy of a political process while officially being neutral with regard to the outcome of that process.

In doctrinal terms, French COIN during the colonial period promoted the idea of a "global approach": Violence would be a small portion of the overall range of activities intervening militaries would undertake as they went about courting

2 See, for example, Bruno Charbonneau, "Dreams of Empire: France, Europe, and the New Interventionism in Africa," *Modern & Contemporary France* 16, no. 3 (2008): 279–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639480802201560>. Charbonneau's focus is on France's pre-2013 emphasis on Europeanizing interventions and multilateralism, and he argues, in effect, that France is still acting on neocolonial and ultimately colonial instincts.

3 Yvan Guichaoua, "The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel," *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020): 895–911, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaa094>; Nathaniel K. Powell, "Battling Instability? The Recurring Logic of French Military Interventions in Africa," *African Security* 10, no. 1 (2017): 47–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2016.1270141>.

4 Ruth Maclean, "Crisis in the Sahel Becoming France's Forever War," *New York Times*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/29/world/africa/france-sahel-west-africa-.html>.

5 Alex Thurston, "France Should Give Mali Space to Negotiate with Jihadists," *War on the Rocks*, April 16, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/france-should-give-mali-space-to-negotiate-with-jihadists/>.

6 Bruno Charbonneau, "Counterinsurgency Governance in the Sahel," *BulletinFrancoPaix* 5, no. 1 (January 2020): 3–6, [https://ffm-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Charbonneau-BulletinFrancoPaix-vol5n1\\_eng.pdf](https://ffm-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Charbonneau-BulletinFrancoPaix-vol5n1_eng.pdf).

7 Thurston, "France Should Give Mali Space to Negotiate with Jihadists."

8 For a critical commentary on the American embrace of French COIN, see, Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counter-insurgency* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2013). As Gentile notes, Americans also drew from British history and doctrine and, of course, the U.S. experience in Vietnam.

hearts and minds. However, the post-colonial force — such as the force France has currently deployed in the Sahel — elects to take a back seat and let the host nation drive, i.e., to undertake (or not) many of the non-combat operations actions that might bring success. This means that, proportionately speaking, the intervening force is focused far more on violence. It also inevitably leads to tensions between the intervening force and the host nation. Lastly, there is a self-defeating element to many post-colonial interventions, one that Charbonneau, Powell, and Thurston document. COIN, per French doctrine past and present, requires some form of political transformation to occur within the host nation, with the understanding that the *status quo ante* is what engendered the insurrection in the first place. However, post-colonial interventions have tended to restore the *status quo ante* and relieve problematic regimes from pressure to reform.

Operation Barkhane is primarily focused on combat operations, despite the French military's insistence that it is applying a global approach. This does not, however, mean that France has abandoned the global approach. It only means that the military has largely evacuated many of the roles a colonial force would have assumed. In its place, France's civilian agencies and their international partners are taking up some of the slack (with debatable efficacy and sufficiency). Perhaps more importantly, France is trying to leave the host nation most of the responsibility for promoting its own legitimacy and for seeing through certain political processes. This includes the implementation of the 2015 Algiers Accord (i.e., the "Algiers Process"), and the political transition following the resignation of Mali's President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. Unsurprisingly, France often is at odds with its Sahelian partners. The progress of French efforts, because they are so dependent on those partners, is doomed to disappoint anyone looking for quick results.

This study is in two parts. The first is an overview of French COIN doctrine and practices from the 19th century to Barkhane. I will distinguish between doctrine and practices because, unsurprisingly, armies do not always do what their textbooks tell them, and because both form the French army's inheritance. I will rely on secondary histories, primary French doctrinal publications, and interviews with current and former French army officers. The second approach is to look closely at

the current French campaign in the Sahel, Operation Barkhane. My sources, again, are mixed: secondary reports, some interviews, and a collection of roughly 1,000 almost-daily reports published on the internet by the French military from 2016 to March 2020. While there is evidence of colonial DNA in contemporary operations, countervailing evidence indicates that the continuities linking the present with historical cases are largely superficial. Indeed, this study finds that the colonial heritage is less meaningful than Lecointre seems to think.

## **The History of French COIN**

The standard narrative of French COIN doctrine focuses on either the colonial doctrine of Gallieni and Lyautey or the Cold War-era doctrine associated with the wars in Indochina (1945 to 1954) and Algeria (1954 to 1962) and men like David Galula, Jacques Hogard, and Roger Trinquier. There was a third generation of French COIN doctrine developed in the 21st century in response to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which prompted French officers to dust off the Indochina-era doctrine and update it. Each generation of France's COIN tradition merits discussion, for the differences are as noteworthy as the similarities. In each instance, what is regarded as "doctrine" is often more accurately described as "myths" or "representations" regarding the French army's approaches and experience. It has to do with the stories French army officers tell themselves, or about how they imagine their predecessors.

## **Belle Époque Empire Building and the Origins of Population-Centric Warfare**

The 19th century roots of French COIN doctrine lie with Marshal Thomas Robert Bugeaud, who secured Algeria for France by putting down a major insurrection in the 1840s.<sup>9</sup> Bugeaud was hostile to the prevailing liberalism of Orléanist France's liberal government and delighted in publicly defending the atrocities committed by his lieutenants. He pointedly agitated for the deportation of Algeria's large Jewish population to their probable deaths ("[A]fter having been parasites, they will be traitors," he assured the minister of war in 1842).<sup>10</sup> His major contribution to COIN, however, can be found

9 A full discussion of Bugeaud is provided by Anthony Thrall Sullivan, *Thomas-Robert Bugeaud, France and Algeria, 1784-1849: Politics, Power, and the Good Society* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1983). Histories of the colonial period by Charles-Robert Ageron and the old-but-still good works of Claude Martin also are instructive.

10 Marshal Thomas Robert Bugeaud, "Lettre du Maréchal Bugeaud au Ministre de la Guerre," May 13, 1842, Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer, 2EE1. For more on Bugeaud and the Jews, see Michael Shurkin, "French Liberal Governance and the Emancipation of Algeria's Jews," *French Historical Studies* 33, no. 2 (2010): 259–80, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00161071-2009-027>.

in his understanding of the people as the real center of gravity in a war against insurgents — an insight that was not self-evident to a veteran of the Napoleonic wars, when the search for a decisive battle was everything.

Bugeaud embraced two methods. One was the *razzia*, which was a rapid raid conducted by light, mobile troops in presumed imitation of indigenous methods of warfare.<sup>11</sup> The *razzia* was population-centric in the sense that it served no military purpose other than terrorizing civilians — contrary to the Napoleonic focus on destroying the adversary's army. The other was the network of *Bureaux Arabes* (Arab Bureaus), which began in Algeria in the 1830s but developed considerably under Bugeaud in the 1840s.<sup>12</sup> The ancestors of the modern-day provincial reconstruction team, the *bureaux* placed a French officer and non-commissioned officer, backed by a force of indigenous troops, among local communities. *Bureaux* officers often learned Arabic and became intimate with the people among whom they lived. They represented the colonial government, provided some services, and collected intelligence.<sup>13</sup>

The next major step came with Gallieni and Lyautey in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They introduced the concept of “pacification,” which was distinct from Bugeaud’s preference for terrorizing and intimidating local populations. Of course, any discussion of their contributions should acknowledge the fact that they did not always do as they said. Douglas Porch, in his invaluable study of Lyautey’s conquest of Morocco, documents the brutality of Lyautey’s methods, and argues that Lyautey’s aim was to deceive the public by masking the reality of colonial operations behind a relatively humane facade.<sup>14</sup>

Gallieni and Lyautey nonetheless expanded on the idea of a population-centric strategy. This approach focused on protecting and rallying the population by limiting violence in favor of “political”

action intended to win what later became referred to as “hearts and minds.”<sup>15</sup> In 1898, Gallieni laid out some of his ideas in a “general order” that was repeated not only by Lyautey in 1900 but also by the French army in 2007 in its doctrinal publication *Gagner la bataille, conduire à la paix* (Win the Battle, Bring About the Peace):

A country is not conquered and pacified when a military operation there has decimated the inhabitants and bent all heads under terror; the first horror calmed, there will germinate the seeds of revolt that the resentment accumulated by the brutal action of force will grow ... The best way to achieve pacification is to employ the combined action of force and politics. We have to remember only to destroy as a last resort; and even then[,] we must only destroy in order to rebuild.<sup>16</sup>

Gallieni came up with the concept of the “oil spot.” Forces secure specific zones and work to positively affect the population within that zone, progressively enlarging each “spot” over time.<sup>17</sup> Lyautey added to the concept of population-centric warfare by developing the distinction between what might be called combat operations — conducted outside the oil spots — and the many activities conducted within the spots, including defensive military operations and intensive surveillance. Lyautey presented the idea of dividing up a specific area into a grid for the purpose of surveillance and intensive policing, but he did not use the word “*quadrillage*.” That word came into use only during the Algerian war of independence, when it sometimes was applied to locking down urban areas, such as during the Battle of Algiers.<sup>18</sup> The term then became associated with the French army’s systematic use of torture to extract intelligence and dismantle Al-

11 Thomas Rid, “Razzia: A Turning Point in Modern Strategy,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 4 (September 16, 2009): 617–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550903153449>; Thomas Rid, “The Nineteenth Century Origins of Counterinsurgency Doctrine,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 5 (2010): 731–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2010.498259>.

12 Rid, “The Nineteenth Century Origins of Counterinsurgency Doctrine,” 735–43.

13 Historians have associated the *Bureaux Arabes* with particular 19th century modernist ideologies as well as the project of establishing racial hierarchies within the colony. See, for example, Patricia M.E. Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1995); Patricia M. E. Lorcin, “The Soldier Scholars of Colonial Algeria. Arabs, Kabyles and Islam: Military Images of France in Algeria,” in *Franco-Arab Encounters, Studies in Memory of David C. Gordon*, ed. David C. Gordon, L. Carl Brown, and Matthew Gordon (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1996), 128–50.

14 Douglas Porch, *The Conquest of Morocco: The Bizarre History of France's Last Great Adventure, the Long Struggle to Subdue a Medieval Kingdom by Intrigue and Force of Arms, 1903-1914* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982).

15 General Hubert Lyautey, *Du rôle colonial de l'armée* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1900).

16 Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, *Gagner la bataille, conduire à la paix: Les forces terrestres dans les conflits aujourd'hui et demain* (Paris: Ministère de la défense, 2007), 11, <http://www.guerredeFrance.fr/DOC/FT-01.pdf>; Lyautey, *Du rôle colonial de l'armée*.

17 Rid, “The Nineteenth Century Origins of Counterinsurgency Doctrine,” 750.

18 Lyautey, *Du rôle colonial de l'armée*.



gerian terrorist networks.<sup>19</sup>

The French, in their 19th- and early-20th-century colonial operations, developed some interesting adaptations to these doctrines, necessitated primarily by the French government's refusal to adequately source its colonial adventures. Forced to make do with few people, French commanders came to prize mobility and favor smaller and lighter formations than what they might have used in Europe. They also recruited large numbers of indigenous auxiliaries of various kinds and became proficient at making the most of their abilities. The French learned to master what today is referred to as the "human terrain" (and exploit divisions among local groups — *divide et impera* — which is how France subdued northern Mali in the first place<sup>20</sup>). To this day, it is an article of faith in the French army that they have a particular knack for building relationships with local populations. They refer to it as "interculturality."

The French had to entrust young junior commanders with considerable authority to go along with their *de facto* autonomy.<sup>21</sup> The result is a command style the French refer to as *subsidiarité* or "command by objective," and the U.S. Army sometimes calls "mission command." According to current U.S. Army COIN doctrine, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, published in 2014, such autonomy is essential for COIN operations.<sup>22</sup> Lastly, the French army's colonial officers cultivated an institutional culture marked by risk-taking and daring that characterizes the French army's institutional culture to this day.

## From Colonial Doctrine to COIN: Indochina and Algeria

France engaged in numerous colonial wars in the first half of the 20th century. The most notable of these wars was the Rif War in Morocco (1924 to 1925), in which the French used a mix of colonial and conventional tactics, including armor operations that had more in common with the Western Front in 1918 than colonial "pacification" practices.<sup>23</sup> In terms of the evolution of COIN doctrine, however, the next major step was the Indochina War. This war was unequaled with respect to the extreme disparity between the ends France sought to attain

[T]he French army's colonial officers cultivated an institutional culture marked by risk-taking and daring that characterizes the French army's institutional culture to this day.

and the scant means it was willing to devote to attaining them. French forces had to invent and adapt. They experimented with static positions and base designs, shifting from small posts to large posts, and moved their concentration from attempting to control territory to focusing simply on lines of communication.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes they eschewed bases in favor of "nomadizing" units that wandered permanently in a specific zone.<sup>25</sup> They also experimented with amphibious and riverine operations.

As in earlier colonial conflicts, the French relied on mobility, making extensive use of airborne capabilities and air transport, and depended to a dangerous degree on a small ragtag fleet of aircraft that the French could barely keep airborne due to limited air and maintenance crews, as well as vari-

19 A number of scholars, among them Raphaëlle Branche, have argued that the logic of torture was inseparable from the logic of domination inherent to colonialism. Raphaëlle Branche, *La torture et l'armée pendant la guerre d'Algérie (1954-1962)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

20 Pierre Boilley, *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh: Dépendances et révoltes - du Soudan français au Mali contemporain* (Paris: Karthala, 1999), 66–95; Charles Grémont, "Tuaregs et Arabes dans les forces armées coloniales et maliennes: Une histoire en trompe-l'œil," *Note de l'Ifri* (Paris: Ifri, 2010), 5–9.

21 Stéphane Taillat, "National Traditions and International Context: French Adaptation to Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century," *Security Challenges* 6, no. 1 (2010): 86, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26459471>.

22 U.S. Department of the Army, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* (Washington DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2014), <https://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf>.

23 Beaufre provides a short but rich glimpse at Rif War operations in General André Beaufre, *1940: The Fall of France* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).

24 On the subject of the French Army's fortified posts and other innovations, see Michel Goya, *Innovations en Indochine: Les transformations du Corps expéditionnaire français en Extrême-Orient (1945-1954)* (Self-published via Amazon, 2017).

25 Hogard discusses nomadization and other approaches. See, Mériadec Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard: stratège de la contre-insurrection* (Paris: Economica, 2014), 42, 86.

able weather conditions.<sup>26</sup> The French fought light for the sake of mobility, meaning they used infantry with little support. To supplement their paltry numbers, the French depended on large numbers of colonial troops raised in North and West Africa (among them 60,000 Moroccans), a newly formed Vietnamese National Army, local Indochinese recruited directly into French units, and various classes of auxiliary troops (*supplétifs*) and militias.<sup>27</sup> According to Michel Goya, there were never more than 60,000 soldiers from *métropolitain* France in Indochina. A total of 350,000 indigenous troops served.<sup>28</sup> Among them were counter-guerilla units raised among tribes and led by a lone French officer and a French non-commissioned officer that “nomadized” behind enemy lines with minimal support.<sup>29</sup> They also experimented with Vietnamese-run *groupements administratifs mobiles opérationnels*, or operational mobile administrative groups. These acted to fill the vacuum created between a clearing operation and the period when the Vietnamese state could assert itself. Accompanying the groups were French psychological warfare officers who, as Élie Tenenbaum has noted, acted as political commissars in imitation of the Viet Minh’s political commissars.<sup>30</sup> Equally important were the *dispositifs opérationnels de protection*, teams that dismantled communist networks and would, in Algeria, become both widespread and notorious because of their associations with torture.

Some things worked well. By all accounts, French-led indigenous forces and French regular units with a large proportion of Vietnamese personnel fought well and may have had a better record than comparable U.S.-formed entities that fought in the subsequent conflict between North and South Vietnam, especially the ill-fated Army of the Republic of Vietnam.<sup>31</sup> Some things did not work quite as

well. France, for all the prowess of its indigenous troops, never had enough men or resources. The French army’s taste for risk-taking and its over-reliance on air links combined to bring about the disaster at Dien Bien Phu.<sup>32</sup> Another serious problem was the disconnect between France’s professional officers and its disinterested civilian leadership and population, a gap that would grow and finally come to a head in Algeria and the attempted coup of 1961. The crisis was a painful reminder of the need to align military tactics and strategy with political goals. Subsequent French military theorists, from Gen. André Beaufre, who served in Indochina and Algeria, to Gen. Vincent Desportes, who is contemporary France’s leading strategic thinker, have insisted as loudly as possible on the need to subordinate military strategy to clear political goals defined by civilian leaders.

The Indochina War fueled a period of intense theoretical work by many of the officers involved, a generation of men that included Marcel Bigeard, Jacques Hogard, Charles Lacheroy, Jean Némé, and Roger Trinquier. David Galula — a classmate of Hogard at the French military academy<sup>33</sup> — was also a part of this group, though he served in China, rather than Indochina. Galula wrote his two best known works in English in the United States after he resigned from his commission. Galula’s influence in France was limited until the early 2000s, when Americans brought Galula to the French army’s attention after Gen. David Petraeus “discovered” him.

To a large extent, these soldier-thinkers adopted colonial doctrine — from the basic population-centric approach to ideas such as the oil spot and *quadrillage*. There are reminders from Hogard that “[e]very operation, however small, must have a political goal,” and “[k]illing the enemy is not an end in itself but the means to retake or preserve control

26 Both of Fall’s books give vivid accounts of the Herculean efforts of the French military’s air services. See, Bernard Fall, *Street without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1989); Bernard Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1966). See also, Goya, *Innovations en Indochine*.

27 Centre de Doctrine d’Emploi des Forces, *L’armée nationale vietnamienne et le recours aux formations supplétives* (Paris: Centre de Doctrine d’Emploi des Forces, 2009); Michel Bodin, *Les Africains dans la guerre d’Indochine, 1947-1954* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000); Michel Bodin, “Les Marocains dans la guerre d’Indochine (1947-1954),” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 259, no. 3 (Sept. 29, 2015): 57–76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24671777>.

28 Goya, *Innovations en Indochine*.

29 Fall, *Street without Joy*, 267–79. See also, Élie Tenenbaum, *Partisans et centurions: Une histoire de la guerre irrégulière au XXe siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2018), 145–47. Counter-guerilla warfare conducted by militias led by French officers is well documented by memoirs of the war, including Dominique de La Motte, *De l’autre côté de l’eau: Indochine, 1950-1952* (Paris: Textes, 2012); Héli de Saint Marc, *Mémoires: les champs de braises* (Paris: Perrin, 2002).

30 Tenenbaum, *Partisans et centurions*, 156.

31 Fall’s books have only praise for the Indochinese and other colonial troops in the French service in Indochina. A 2009 French Army study of the French-raised Indochinese forces points to failures largely associated with a lack of enough French officers and non-commissioned officers to guide them and above-all the lack of time needed to prepare them. France was, to use the American expression, building the airplane while flying it. See, Centre de Doctrine d’Emploi des Forces, *L’armée nationale vietnamienne et le recours aux formations supplétives*.

32 Much has been written about Dien Bien Phu but Bernard Fall remains essential reading. See, Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*.

33 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 21.

of the population ... for the real issue (*enjeu*) is always the population.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Trinquier notes that “[t]he issue (*enjeu*) of modern warfare is the conquest of the population.”<sup>35</sup> These thinkers reiterate the limited importance of armed forces and the need to coordinate military action with civilian efforts. According to Hogard, “The anti-subversive struggle requires the integration at every level of civil and military action in a single global action.”<sup>36</sup> They also evinced skepticism toward the utility of applying conventional military tactics, such as using outposts to control specific geographic areas. Trinquier’s scorn for large-scale cordon-and-search operations is particularly trenchant.<sup>37</sup> The larger the operation is, the less likely it is to achieve anything. The net never closes completely, surprise is never attained. The population always knows.

An important difference between these men and *fin-de-siècle* colonial commanders was the ideologically charged mid-century context in which they fought. They did not see the war in Indochina merely as an insurrection by indigenous people desirous of independence, but rather a local instance of a global war waged on the West by international communism. Ultimately, insurgencies were not spontaneous. Rather, they were a deliberate and planned effort by communists to seize power, even as they were strengthened by what might be termed “root causes,” such as local grievances or economic complaints. Mid-century French commanders understood that this new “revolutionary” war was fundamentally different from a conventional war and required a substantially different approach, force structure, and tactics. Western armies like France’s were designed for an entirely different conflict and thus operated at a distinct disadvantage. Insurgents possessed a well-defined cause and ideology that unified their supporters and motivated their resistance. French commanders bemoaned the fact that, in Indochina, the French side offered nothing comparable beyond the negative ideology of anti-communism. It did not help that

the French cause in Indochina was ambiguous and changed over time. Were they fighting to restore sovereignty as colonial overlords, or to defend nascent countries from communism? Were they trying to re-impose the *status quo ante* or were they offering reforms? This same problem would bedevil French efforts in Algeria.

While France’s 1950s COIN theorists were in absolute agreement about the notion of population-centric operations and the global approach, they held a spectrum of views regarding the relative emphasis on security versus politics or ideas. On one end of the spectrum was Trinquier, who emphasized security.<sup>38</sup> Yes, it was essential to convince the population to support one’s side, but “the surest way to win” the confidence of the population “is to crush our adversaries who want to oppress it.”<sup>39</sup> Only after the “progressive return to peace” can “psychological action on the masses” have any effect, and in any event, the best way to do that is through organizing the population.<sup>40</sup> The same is true for “social action,” which is necessary but comes after security.<sup>41</sup> Trinquier also had a technical approach. For all his talk about the political nature of revolutionary warfare, Trinquier hoped to provide clear instructions for destroying the “politico-military organization” of the enemy. This referred to the hybrid civilian and military organizations that operated among the population, controlled local communities, and conducted military operations. Trinquier envisioned replacing this revolutionary politico-military organization with a new entity, one that would replace the insurgent group’s orientation while mimicking many of its practices.<sup>42</sup>

Hogard, who agreed that it was important to destroy insurgents’ infrastructure, was more attentive to ideological convictions and morale. He placed an emphasis on will that would have done Marshal Ferdinand Foch proud.<sup>43</sup> The population had to know what it is fighting for, and the counter-insurgents had to work constantly to strength-

34 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 43, 107.

35 Roger Trinquier, *La guerre moderne* (Paris: Economica, 2008), 25.

36 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 109.

37 Trinquier, *La guerre moderne*, 56.

38 Trinquier’s views on security may reflect his experience organizing militias for guerilla warfare in Indochina, where the results were disappointing in many regards. See, Centre de Doctrine d’Emploi des Forces, *L’armée nationale vietnamienne et le recours aux formations supplétives*.

39 Trinquier, *La guerre moderne*, 45.

40 Trinquier, *La guerre moderne*, 45.

41 Trinquier, *La guerre moderne*, 46.

42 Trinquier, *La guerre moderne*, 69.

43 Michael Shurkin, “Modern War for Romantics: Ferdinand Foch and the Principles of War,” *War on the Rocks*, July 8, 2020, <http://warontherocks.com/2020/07/modern-war-for-romantics-ferdinand-foch-and-the-principles-of-war/>.



en the population's morale while weakening that of their adversaries.<sup>44</sup> The indigenous armies the French raised, Hogard argued, could not remain apolitical in the model of the French army, given the political nature of their endeavors.<sup>45</sup> Revolutionary war, according to Hogard, was "global" in the sense that it brought the conflict into the heart of societies and people's consciousness.<sup>46</sup> The counter-insurgency should never be about re-establishing the *status quo ante*.<sup>47</sup> The counter-insurgent had to identify precisely which problems it had to fix and then it had to do its best to fix them. Otherwise, it would lose the battles of hearts and minds to the insurgency and its revolutionary ideology. Nonetheless, Hogard was adamant that reforms, while necessary, were never sufficient:

These reforms are not useless. They are even indispensable. But they are not sufficient: the adversary will not be happy with them because it is power he is aiming for.<sup>48</sup>

According to Hogard, "It is in vain to hope to find solutions in negotiations or reforms."<sup>49</sup> Insurgencies were all-or-nothing struggles in which only one side could prevail. Determination was of primary importance.

Given the will to prevail, Hogard emphasized — more so than Trinquier — the need for a massive, coordinated all-of-government global approach. "All our activities" — cultural, economic, political, military, and social — have to be "intimately integrated and impregnated with an incessant psychological concern," geared for the single purpose of destroying the adversary's "politico-military organization" and replacing it "with ours."<sup>50</sup> Hogard also highlighted the importance of psychological warfare, propaganda, and counter-propaganda, including the need to provide for the political instruction of one's own soldiers.<sup>51</sup>

Hogard was involved in the drafting of the 1957 French army publication, *Instruction provisoire*

*sur l'emploi de l'arme psychologique* (Provisional Instruction for the Use of Psychological Warfare), which also is associated with Charles Lacheroy and the "psychological school" of COIN.<sup>52</sup> *Instruction provisoire* was heavily influenced by close readings of Lenin, Mao, and Trotsky, and it reflected the strong impression made on many in the French army by the Viet Minh, including officers who had been through re-education programs in Viet Minh prisoner-of-war camps.<sup>53</sup> According to *Instruction provisoire*, "psychological action" is

[t]he coordinated use of various means and measures intended to enlighten opinion and orient sentiment, attitude, and comportment of neutral or friendly populations, with the intention of countering adverse influence, encouraging the sympathy of neutrals, and fortifying the determination and fighting spirit of friendlies.<sup>54</sup>

Psychological action could not be a token activity. It had to be a major line of effort conducted and overseen by centralized authorities. It reinforced the need to have civilians integrated into commanders' staffs, necessitated by the mandate for a coordinated whole-of-government approach. In a sense, everything now was propaganda. Any and all action had to be conducted with its psychological effect in mind. The "psychological school" is as far as one can get from the old Clausewitzian imperative to destroy the adversary's army in a decisive battle — one could win a psychological war without ever engaging the enemy in physical combat.

The Algerian War was an opportunity for French officers to apply what they thought were the lessons of Indochina. They had far greater resources at their disposal thanks to greater political commitment and the willingness to send conscripts rather than rely on the French army's professional units. After all, Algeria was part of France juridically and just a few hours' flight away, unlike the

44 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 70.

45 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 47.

46 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 70.

47 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 70.

48 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 78.

49 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 78.

50 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 79.

51 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 99.

52 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 102.

53 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 102. For a good brief discussion of Lacheroy's insights in Indochina, where he developed his ideas regarding psychological warfare, as well as some of their application in Algeria, see Tenenbaum, *Partisans et centurions*, 156–57, 246–47.

54 État-Major des forces armées, *Instruction provisoire sur l'emploi de l'arme psychologique* (Paris: Ministère de la défense, 1957), 8, <https://www.infoguerre.fr/fichiers/tta117.pdf>.



distant colony of Indochina. Given Algeria's enormous size, however, the French military faced similar problems. There was a need to be everywhere at once, which again encouraged an emphasis on extreme mobility and led the French army to pioneer heliborne warfare. The general pattern was to operate light and rely on fire support from aircraft whenever combat situations got too dire. The French also practiced the mass displacement and resettlement of rural populations in the effort to drain the pond in which Algerian insurgents swam. This made Algerian civilians easier to control and subject to "psychological" programming.

One measure of note was the development of 700 *sections administratives spécialisées* (specialized administrative sections), which in some ways were a revival of the 19th century *Bureaux Arabes* — they were "very inspired" by Lyautey and his conception of the "colonial" officer.<sup>55</sup> The *sections* consisted of a French officer and non-commissioned officer, a few civilian specialists, an interpreter, a

radio operator, and occasionally a woman tasked with reaching out to the Algerian female population. Backing them was a force of 30 to 50 people, who were a combination of Europeans, indigenous Muslim fighters, and colonial troops from sub-Saharan Africa. The idea was that the *sections* would coordinate security and tend their oil spots, filling a gap in governance and providing services to inhabitants underserved by the existing colonial administration. They were also platforms for delivering psychological messaging. The *sections*, among other activities, aided the experimental "Constantine Plan," which took psychological action to a whole new level by leveraging American social science and "scientific" marketing techniques to appeal to local Algerians and pull them away from the insurgency.<sup>56</sup> The French repeated their experiments with the *dispositifs opérationnels de protection*. Galula praised these teams as the "single most important improvement in our [counter-insurgency] operations in Algeria."<sup>57</sup> They filled a critical gap created

55 Tenenbaum, *Partisans et centurions*, 243; Michel Goya, "La peur et le cœur. Les incohérences de la contre-guérilla française pendant la guerre d'Algérie," *Stratégie* 93-94-95-96, no. 1 (2009): 403, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-strategie-2009-1-page-399.htm>. On the *Sections administratives spécialisées*, see Alistaire Horne, *A Savage War of Peace* (New York, NY: Viking, 1978), 108–109.

56 Muriam Haleh Davis, "'The Transformation of Man' in French Algeria: Economic Planning and the Postwar Social Sciences, 1958–62," *Journal of Contemporary History* 52, no. 1 (2016): 73–94, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022009416647117>.

57 David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956–1958* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006), 183–84, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG478-1.html>.



by the insufficiencies of the civil police and judicial system, which was never resourced adequately to handle individuals detained on suspicion of insurgent activities.

As Galula relates in his memoir of Algeria, *Pacification in Algeria*, the French — under the influence of the psychological school — conducted psychological warfare. This was understood in terms of shaping local perceptions, building trust, and instilling confidence that the French side was the winning side. The French also promoted various reforms, from large-scale legislative initiatives and economic development projects, to building and staffing schools at the local level (where commanders like Galula were operating), putting people to work, and improving the village water supply. Galula, according to the memoir, had his men live in the villages — where, he said, they quickly understood that their safety depended on how well they got on with the inhabitants — and it was not long before they learned to recognize the inhabitants and know

**As Galula relates in his memoir of Algeria, *Pacification in Algeria*, the French — under the influence of the psychological school — conducted psychological warfare. This was understood in terms of shaping local perceptions, building trust, and instilling confidence that the French side was the winning side.**

them by name.<sup>58</sup> He found ways to test locals and to involve them, in order to give them a stake in the success of various projects. He made sure that his men had talking points and news to share with the locals, not just to inform them but also to promote certain ideas. Galula found other initiatives promoted by the psychological warfare officers to be less effective. He accused them of attempting to uncritically apply to Algerians many of the same

methods that had been applied to French prisoners of war in Viet Minh camps, including brain-washing techniques.<sup>59</sup> Galula, however, approved of instructions issued by headquarters outlining steps to take to pacify the population, steps he mostly undertook and with good results.<sup>60</sup>

Galula falls somewhere between Trinquier and the psychological school with respect to his emphasis on military action. His actions as company commander could have been taken straight out of Trinquier's *La guerre moderne* (Modern Warfare), and he was critical of French attempts to conduct psychological warfare. However, he did not discount the psychological aspect of COIN and made a point of stressing the importance of a clear cause and an ideological basis for counter-insurgency operations. "[W]isdom and expediency," he wrote, "demand that the counterinsurgent equip himself with a political program designed to take as much wind as possible out of the insurgent's sails."<sup>61</sup> The counter-insurgent, Galula insisted, had to "arm himself with a competing cause."<sup>62</sup> He also thought it crucial to build a political party and a "national political movement" to mobilize and galvanize the portion of the population that was on the counter-insurgent's side.<sup>63</sup> In his area of responsibility, Galula started what he hoped would be the nucleus of a party, and he tried to sell the French command on the idea.<sup>64</sup> Ultimately — and this is an important point in light of post-colonial attempts to apply Galula's COIN doctrine and those of his contemporaries — Galula thought the best argument for counter-insurgents to make was that they were there to stay.<sup>65</sup> Algerian Muslims "were no fools," he observed.<sup>66</sup> Even France's staunchest supporters had no choice but to hedge their bets. Interestingly, Galula, unlike Trinquier and the psychological school, was not interested in mimicking Viet Minh insurgents. He appreciated and respected the differences between the insurgent and the counter-insurgent.

Galula thought creating a distinct counter-insurgency ideology was essential, though he was unim-

58 Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, 90, 99, 157.

59 Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, 52–53, 65.

60 Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, 92–93.

61 David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 1964), 72.

62 Galula, Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 71.

63 Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, 205–206.

64 Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, 205–209.

65 Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 72.

66 Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, 176.



pressed by the efforts being made by his peers. He related the following exchange with a “psychologist” on the staff of Gen. Raoul Salan (the French commander in Algeria from 1956 to 1958):

[Galula] “I wonder what kind of ideology you think you can furnish [Muslims selected to become leaders of a counter-insurgent movement] with. The rebels have an ideology, simple and effective because it appeals to passion: independence. What can you oppose to that?”

[Staff officer] “Humanism, co-operation, social progress, economic development, etc.”<sup>67</sup>

As Galula noted, the counter-insurgent can only match the insurgent’s appeal to the heart with an appeal to the head: “He has to gamble that reason, in the long run, will prevail over passion.”<sup>68</sup>

Relatedly, Galula and many of his peers grappled with the moral consequences of mobilizing militias. The French in Algeria, just as in Indochina, promised to protect those who sided with them. But in Indochina, France betrayed its allies and left them at the mercy of the communists. Some officers in Algeria, less confident that France would stay, were reluctant to make the same promises. As it happened, France abandoned its allies again, with notorious results. Hélié de Saint-Marc, a participant in the 1961 coup attempt against President Charles de Gaulle, made clear that the anguish he felt over the looming abandonment of France’s indigenous allies to certain massacre — just as he had abandoned his men in Indochina — was what compelled him to join the *putsch* against France’s president.<sup>69</sup> While few were willing to take so extreme a step, it is clear that many French officers, probably including Galula, shared the sense of anguish and understood the putschists’ motivations even if they opposed their decisions.

Whether or not French methods worked in Algeria is difficult to determine. Many, including Michel Goya — a retired French army colonel who

is now a respected and influential military historian and analyst — argue that on balance, they did work.<sup>70</sup> However, as Goya noted, French methods in Algeria often were inconsistent, with numerous different commanders applying many doctrines and methods.<sup>71</sup> Galula similarly described French officers as generally falling into two camps: the “warriors,” who “challenged the very idea that the population was the real objective,” and the “pacifiers,” or, more extremely, the “psychologists,” who thought “psychological action was the answer to everything.”<sup>72</sup> He complained of a “mosaic pattern of pacification in the field,” with each commander applying a different approach, often based on his own interpretation of the lessons learned while serving in Indochina.<sup>73</sup>

Galula acknowledged that, over time, the pacification school grew in influence as the results spoke for themselves. They were more fully embraced in 1959 with the so-called *Plan Challe*. *Plan Challe* was the apogee of French COIN: It paired full implementation of COIN methods with aggressive combat operations that, naturally, emphasized mobility.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, the barriers the French had put up in 1957 along the Moroccan and Tunisian borders to cut off the flow of men and weapons into Algeria were taking their toll on rebel forces. For Galula and many of his peers, it was clear that France was winning. However, they may have conceded that it would have been impossible to know whether what they did made a difference within the broader scope of the conflict and the various parallel efforts being made by other commanders.

The fact of the matter is that France walked away from Algeria because de Gaulle decided that keeping the colony, regardless of the terms, was not in France’s best interests. The lesson here is not whether or not COIN works, but rather the need for military operations to align with political objectives. Leading French theorists then and now — men like Beaufre and Desportes — insist on this point in their books as loudly as they can.<sup>75</sup>

In any case, the withdrawal and the opprobrium that settled around French COIN theorists because of the use of torture in Algeria and the attempted coup

67 Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 66.

68 Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 72.

69 Saint Marc, *Mémoires: les champs de braies*.

70 Goya, “La peur et le cœur,” 399.

71 Goya, “La peur et le cœur.”

72 Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, 64–65.

73 Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, 177.

74 For more on the *Plan Challe*, see Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, 330–39.

75 See, for example, André Beaufre, *L'Expédition de Suez* (Paris: Grasset, 1967); Vincent Desportes, *Comprendre la guerre*, 2nd edition (Paris: Economica, 2001).

against de Gaulle put an end to French reflection on COIN doctrine. The French military elected to focus on preparing for major combat operations in Europe and nuclear warfare.<sup>76</sup> The Algeria experience raised an important point about the feasibility of COIN: It required a massive effort to be successful.

### Toward a Post-Colonial Approach: Chad as a Prototype

After Algeria, France did not cease its involvement in small wars in which COIN was pertinent. Yet, after 1962, French military interventions would be different in many ways. Size, of course, was an important factor. None of France's post-Algeria interventions (with the arguable exception of the Persian Gulf War, from 1990 to 1991) has been important enough for French interests to merit allocating more than minimal resources. This meant that France's expeditionary units — which prior to 1962 had a colonial vocation — again found themselves in the familiar position of having to accomplish a great deal with very little, take great risks, and practice *subsidiarité* out of necessity. More profoundly, France ceased to intervene to shore up its own legitimacy and preserve its rule. From now on, it was acting to shore up a host nation, which meant that many of the political activities colonial militaries engaged in per colonial- and Cold War-era COIN doctrine were no longer appropriate. The burden for that work was now on the shoulders of the host nation, demanding a change in tactics and focus for French forces.

This created the paradox pointed to by Charbonneau, Powell, and others, whereby the French, by virtue of intervening, were in fact relieving from the host nation pressure to engage in reforms. France was preserving the *status quo ante*, with negative consequences over the long term. After President François Mitterrand's speech in 1990 at La Baule, in which he gave notice that France was more interested in democratization than in protecting client regimes, France would sometimes intervene to protect the legitimacy of a political process while ostensibly being neutral with respect to the outcome of that process.<sup>77</sup>

The 1990s also would see the turn toward multinational interventions — most often peacekeeping operations under a U.N. mandate — rather than

unilateral ones. One resulting development was the emergence of an ostensibly apolitical approach to conflict, wherein the problems associated with a conflict are seen as technical ones to be addressed through bureaucratic measures.<sup>78</sup> This was an important change from 1950s-era doctrine that insisted on understanding conflicts as essentially political. It also imposes a sort of blindness on the part of the intervening power, which believes itself to be apolitical — and thus not affecting local politics — when its intervention by definition was political and had profound effects on local politics.

A telling example of a French post-colonial intervention is the intervention in Chad from 1969 to 1972, referred to as Operation Bison. The operation sat uncomfortably astride a transition from colonial to post-colonial. It was like a colonial campaign in some ways, but different in others, and it featured a number of tensions that arose from the application, however modified, of an essentially colonial approach (COIN) to a post-colonial setting.

In 1965, a civil war broke out in Chad, a former colony of France that had become independent in 1960. The war pitted Chad's first post-independence president, François Tombalbaye, who presided over a predominantly southern government, against a generally northern rebel coalition. France, responding to Tombalbaye's request that it honor the security accords between the two countries, refused to commit more than about 3,000 soldiers, most of whom were light infantry, backed up by a small collection of helicopters and transport aircraft along with a handful of Douglas A-1 Skyraider ground attack planes. French forces predictably focused on mobile operations.<sup>79</sup> These included having units "nomadize" until they made contact with the enemy. Thereafter, they would attempt to chase enemy fighters into a blocking force helicoptered into position. Usually, the French could count on superior infantry tactics to enable them to hang on long enough for air support to arrive. But this was not always the case: Twelve paratroopers died in October 1970 in Bedo when a French convoy was ambushed.<sup>80</sup> The limited number of Skyraiders, which could not be everywhere at once in a vast country, is indicative of the kind of gamble French expeditionary forces routinely took. The French

76 A notable exception is André Beaufre, *La guerre révolutionnaire: Les formes nouvelles de la guerre* (Paris: Fayard, 1972). This work, despite its high quality, does not appear to have had any influence. The likely explanation is a lack of interest in the subject post-1962.

77 This is how a French commander in the Central African Republic in 2014 describes his mission in his forthcoming memoir. Colonel Armel Dirou, *Ten Thousand Lives to Save*, unpublished, 2020.

78 Guichaoua, "The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel."

79 Michel Goya, *La France en guerre au Tchad (1969-1972): La victoire oubliée* (Self-published via Amazon, 2018).

80 Marielle Debos and Nathaniel Powell, "L'autre pays des « guerres sans fin », " *Les Temps Modernes* 693-694, no. 2 (2017): 231, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-les-temps-modernes-2017-2-page-221.htm>.

also counted on Chadian troops and local militia to fill in areas they had cleared, conducting what in essence was an oil spot strategy.

The French applied a limited version of their venerable population-centric and whole-of-government approach, which paired military action with efforts to improve governance and spur economic development. Thus, alongside the French expeditionary force, French civilians ran an administrative reform mission, which reflected the French understanding of the conflict — that to a considerable degree, the rebellion in Chad was the government's own fault.<sup>81</sup> The mission, led by none other than a former colonial governor, inspected the Chadian administration, attempted administrative reforms, appointed people to various positions, and ran development projects. The French also organized militias and in some instances, re-introduced local chiefly authorities (a measure that was contrary to Tombalbaye's centralization effort).<sup>82</sup> They did this while insisting that France could only help the regime address its problems — it could not solve them.<sup>83</sup> The French also took the Chadian security services in hand by setting up officer schools and placing hundreds of French advisers throughout Chad's military establishment, providing equipment, including aircraft, vehicles, and small arms. At one point, France merged its expeditionary force with the Chadian military, creating a combined general staff that placed all of Chad's security services under the command of a French general.<sup>84</sup>

France's assertion of control was relative, in a way that marked Bison as sitting astride the transition from a colonial campaign to a post-colonial operation. Depending on one's point of view, the French did too much or too little, asserting some control — which for some Chadians was too much — while refusing to go further in the name of respecting Chadian sovereignty and wishing to leave management of the political aspects of the conflict to the Chadians. Interestingly, according to Nathaniel Powell, a scholar of French interventions in Africa, France's Cooperation Ministry felt it necessary to push back against the ambitions of the chief

of the administrative reform mission, noting that he appeared intent on recolonizing the country. It recommended that the government rein in French army activities and force the mission to “adhere to a more limited mandate.”<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, Tombalbaye and Chadian civilian and military officials clashed with the French.<sup>86</sup> French notions of good governance and French reform priorities did not align with those of Tombalbaye.

Goya, who calls Operation Bison a “victory” despite its limited success, congratulated France for having objectives that were proportionate to the resources it was willing to invest. In this case, France aspired to shore up Chad's government (which it did, albeit temporarily) and pacify much of southern and central Chad. In contrast, pacifying northern Chad cost more than what France was willing to pay. France was content to reduce the threat there and called it a day. This modesty of ambition — proportionate to the country's means — is in some ways commendable, particularly compared to Americans' often unrealistic ambitions encouraged by their vast resources. Gen. Michel Yakovlev, who is currently one of the French army's most prominent theorists, wrote a book (which is required reading in some French military schools) arguing that France's many small overseas operations have tended to result in modest but real strategic successes — results which compare favorably to the lack of success achieved by the United States.<sup>87</sup>

Powell, who is more interested in Chad's long-term stability, is less impressed. He noted that “even when interventions succeed on their own terms, they often did so while contributing to longer-term destabilizing dynamics.”<sup>88</sup> “These failures,” he continued, “highlight the ultimate futility of a highly militarized security policy.” In the immediate case of Bison, the victory proclaimed by Goya “removed any incentive for Tombalbaye to address the underlying causes of rebellion or to negotiate with surviving rebel constituencies.” His “increasingly repressive rule,” is what finally “led to his death in a bloody coup d'état by disaffected army officers three years later.”<sup>89</sup>

81 Debos and Powell, “L'autre pays des « guerres sans fin »,” 228. See also, Nathaniel K. Powell, “Experts in Decolonization? French Statebuilding and Counterinsurgency in Chad, 1969-1972,” *The International History Review* 42, no. 2 (2019): 318, 321, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1588769>.

82 Powell, “Experts in Decolonization?” 327.

83 For a good discussion of the Administrative Reform Mission, see Debos and Powell, “L'autre pays des « guerres sans fin »,” 228–30; Powell, “Experts in Decolonization?” 322–24.

84 Goya, *La France en guerre au Tchad*; Powell, “Experts in Decolonization?” 322.

85 Powell, “Experts in Decolonization?” 327.

86 Debos and Powell, “L'autre pays des « guerres sans fin »,” 229.

87 Général Michel Yakovlev, *Tactique théorique*, 3rd edition (Paris: Economica, 2016), XXI.

88 Powell, “Battling Instability?” 57.

89 Powell, “Battling Instability?” 58.



## Afghanistan, Iraq, and the French Army's Revision of COIN Doctrine

COIN was virtually a taboo topic in the French army because of torture and the Algiers *putsch* until the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, French involvement in peacekeeping and stability operations in Africa and the Balkans during the 1990s encouraged the evolution of ideas regarding what was then referred to in the United States as “military operations other than war.” As Saint Cyr Military Academy professor and army officer Stéphane Taillat notes, these operations tended to take place in a context that differed from the Cold War-era conflicts. French troops intervened in Africa and the Balkans as arbiters and peace enforcers, operations which often involved protecting people from predation. Still, Taillat writes, their tactical procedures were “much the same as in the colonial era or in the decolonization wars (except that they have to comply with Law of Land Warfare).”<sup>90</sup> The French army continued to conduct the aid and development activities that once were part of its COIN playbook (now referring to them as “civil-military actions”), only now, these operations were depoliticized and created frictions with suspicious non-governmental aid organizations.<sup>91</sup>

It was American interest in COIN and their fascination with Galula, combined with the spectacle of the Iraq War and the operational requirements of the French army's deployment to the Kapisa Province in Afghanistan in 2008, that caused the French to dust off Algeria-era publications and update them in light of American and British innovations, most notably the American Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*. Spearheading this work was the French army's *Centre de Doctrine et d'Emploi des Force* (Center for Doctrine and the Use of Force) under Desportes and later Gen. Thierry Olivier. The center republished the 1957 *Instruction provisoire*, along with new works such as *Gagner la bataille, conduire à la paix*, discussions of applying COIN to Afghanistan, and historical studies related to Indochina and Algeria.<sup>92</sup> Economica, an

independent publishing house with a “Security and Doctrine” collection directed by Desportes, published a number of studies, at least one of which was written for the center.<sup>93</sup>

In 2008, Economica published a translation of Galula's *Counter-Insurgency: Theory and Practice*, alongside a new edition of Trinquier's *La guerre moderne*. Interestingly, Col. Philippe de Montenon, who translated Galula into French for Economica, said he first heard of Galula while attending the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College in 2005, the year Petraeus became the school's commandant.<sup>94</sup> Petraeus instituted a history of COIN class that included Galula on the curricula. When de Montenon returned to France, he suggested to Desportes that he translate Galula, if only as a means to talk to American officers about COIN. de Montenon also noted that Petraeus' interest in Galula was a balm at a time when the U.S. military was still in the throes of its “freedom fries” period of anti-French sentiment. COIN expertise had become an asset enhancing the prestige of the French military internationally.

Perhaps the most important of the center's COIN-related publications from this period are *Gagner la bataille* and *Doctrine de contre rébellion* (Counter-Insurgency Doctrine), published in 2009. To be clear, *Gagner la bataille* is not about COIN *per se*. Rather, it is a reflection on contemporary conflict, perhaps inspired by France's involvement in peacekeeping operations in Africa and the Balkans. Taillat asserts that the American experience in Iraq was also an important influence.<sup>95</sup> Desportes himself either wrote it or directly supervised its composition, as it closely resembles an essay published under his name by the *Centre de Doctrine et d'Emploi des Force* at roughly the same time.<sup>96</sup>

*Gagner la bataille* references Gallieni and Lyautey — citing Gallieni's 1898 “general orders” approvingly — and argues for a global approach. It describes a “stabilization phase” that is not sequential with major combat operations (to use the American parlance), but rather describes a kind of conflict distinct from conventional warfare, one that requires

90 Taillat, “National Traditions and International Context,” 88.

91 Paul Haéri, “Militaires et humanitaires en phase de post-conflit : concurrence ou complémentarité?” *Inflexions* 5, no. 1 (2007): 61–76, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-inflexions-2007-1-page-61.htm>.

92 Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, *L'armée nationale vietnamienne et le recours aux formations supplétives*; Lieutenant Betrand Valeyre, “Gagner les cœurs et les esprits”: *Origine historique du concept; application actuelle en Afghanistan* (Paris: Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, 2010), <https://en.calameo.com/books/00000977906c791ca523f>.

93 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*; Colonel Hervé de Courrèges, Colonel Emmanuel Germain, and Colonel Nicolas Le Nen, *Principes de contre-insurrection* (Paris: Economica, 2010).

94 “Telephone Interview with Senior French Officer,” April 28, 2020.

95 Taillat, “National Traditions and International Context,” 88.

96 See, for example, Vincent Desportes, “Forces terrestres et nouvelle conflictualité,” *Doctrine: Revue d'études générales*, no. 13 (2007): 4–6.



Unlike France's colonial adventures, the closest the French in Afghanistan got to operating militia or recruiting *supplétifs* was their involvement with NATO's Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team program, which worked with Afghan security forces.



political action in greater proportions than military operations.<sup>97</sup> From now on, *Gagner la bataille* asserts, most conflicts will be fought “among” (*au sein de*) the population. Such wars cannot be won through a decisive battle.<sup>98</sup> Rather, the decisive phase is the stabilization phase, which comes after the battle and consists of a host of “political” and other actions undertaken mostly by the police and other security services (but not the army), and various civilian agencies and ministries.

*Doctrine de contre rébellion* was written in the same population-centric spirit as *Gagner la bataille*. Its focus is on COIN and it serves as a reprisal of Indochina-era doctrine, albeit with less language evoking “revolutionary warfare,” subversion, psychological warfare, or ideology. The document builds upon a number of familiar assertions, such as “the conduct of counter-rebellion must above all produce a predominately political effect: securing the theater though action among the populations.”<sup>99</sup> The focus (*l'enjeu*) of the struggle is “first the population,” which is “why the first pillar of the struggle against a rebellion rests on actions taken among the populations.”<sup>100</sup> The idea is to defeat insurgencies by separating them from the population and drying up support for them among the population through a variety of measures. These include information operations and propaganda, work supported by “military influence operation tactical teams” and “military information operations detachments.”<sup>101</sup> Indeed, each operation has effects on the human environment beyond its intended immediate effect that commanders have to have in mind. This is not far from Hogard, who said: “Every action, however small it might be, must have a political goal.”<sup>102</sup> It follows that actual violence is something one should keep to a minimum, and activities like *ratissage* and cordon-and-search operations should be done selectively.<sup>103</sup> *Doctrine*

*de contre rébellion* insists that commanders ask themselves if the use of force will actually improve security and have the desired political effect.

Operationally speaking, *Doctrine de contre rébellion* recommends the oil spot method: dividing territory into zones one secures where one uses gendarmes and police to ensure security, and zones where one conducts more aggressive military operations with combat soldiers, some of whom nomadize.<sup>104</sup> On the subject of cordon and search and *ratissage*, there’s an excerpt recalling an operation in Algeria in 1957.<sup>105</sup> Forces are to conduct offensive acts of “dissuasive pressure” to expand the oil spots.<sup>106</sup> The goal is to “create insecurity on the rebels’ home territory to force them to keep on the move and deny them liberty of action.”<sup>107</sup> Unsurprisingly, the text discusses the need to work with local forces, to support them, train them, and accompany them, because “in the long term, the local forces constitute one of the pillars of the re-establishment of a state capable of conducting and assuring its interior and exterior defense,” a capability “upon which to a large extent the conditions of the withdrawal of allied forces depends.”<sup>108</sup>

In Afghanistan, French forces applied a variety of approaches, rather than a single doctrine. One reason for this was the fact that the French military mission in Afghanistan evolved significantly over time — by 2008, the French army was undertaking operations in the Kapisa Province which were effectively unplanned.<sup>109</sup> Another is the French institutional tendency — itself a colonial heritage — to let field commanders adapt as they see fit, notwithstanding official published doctrine. Each task force commander adapted and invented doctrine more or less as he went along.

Nonetheless, the various written accounts and analyses, such as those by Christophe Lafaye and Taillat, indicate a consensus around the need

97 Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, *Gagner la bataille*, 122.

98 Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, *Gagner la bataille*, 23.

99 Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, *Doctrine de contre rébellion* (Paris: Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, 2009), 22.

100 Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, *Doctrine de contre rébellion*, 22.

101 Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, *Doctrine de contre rébellion*, 26.

102 Raffray, *Général Jacques Hogard*, 107.

103 *Ratissage*, which literally means “raking,” generally refers to a sweep of an area in search of militants or their materiel — Galula describes these operations in detail in *Pacification in Algeria*.

104 Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, *Doctrine de contre rébellion*, 23, 28.

105 Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, *Doctrine de contre rébellion*, 40.

106 Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, *Doctrine de contre rébellion*, 31.

107 Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, *Doctrine de contre rébellion*, 32.

108 Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, *Doctrine de contre rébellion*, 48.

109 Lafaye’s account of the evolution of the French mission in Afghanistan is instructive. See, Christophe Lafaye, “Le génie en Afghanistan. Adaptation d’une arme en situation de contre-insurrection (2001-2012): Hommes, matériels, emploi” (Aix-en-Provence: Institut d’études politiques d’Aix-en-Provence, 2013).



for a population-centric approach that mixed non-violent “political” actions taken to influence the population and aggressive efforts to harass and deter insurgents.<sup>110</sup> There was, according to Taillat, a concern for “moral conquest” rather than “physical conquest.”<sup>111</sup> Besides echoing the concern first articulated by Gallieni with regard to the use of force, this approach diverges from the extreme forms of coercion that had emerged in Algeria. Unlike France's colonial adventures, the closest the French in Afghanistan got to operating militia or recruiting *supplétifs* was their involvement with NATO's Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team program, which worked with Afghan security forces. The French did not exercise any sort of control over the Afghan government, except perhaps through its support for U.N. or non-government organization programs intended to improve governance.

The deadly ambush of French infantry in the Uzbin Valley, Afghanistan in 2008, which cost the lives of nine soldiers (a 10th was killed when a road collapsed beneath his vehicle), was a turning point for the French approach to Afghanistan. It forced a revision of the French army's non-chalance with respect to support, with the new mantra being “*pas un pas sans appui* (not one step without support).”<sup>112</sup> France deployed more support elements, from helicopters to its new 155 mm *camion équipé d'un système d'artillerie* (CAESAR) howitzers, and enjoined its units to take fuller advantage of all the various forms of support provided by the larger American formation in which the French Task Force was embedded. Lastly, there was a pronounced trend toward bunkerization inside fortified forward-operating bases and under the protective umbrella of the howitzers, something that Hogard and Trinquier explicitly discouraged.<sup>113</sup> French officers speak of this as “Americanization.”

### Current French COIN Doctrine

The French military ended its deployment to Afghanistan in late 2012. In April 2013, it released a joint publication, *Contre-insurrection. Contre-insurrection* has much in common with the 2009 *Doc-*

*trine de contre rébellion*, though it is a richer text that reflects a deeper meditation on the realities of post-colonial operations and the implications for “intervention forces” operating in a sovereign host nation. At last, one sees a major shift away from colonial doctrine. Theoretically, *Contre-insurrection* has profound relevance for current French activities in Mali and sheds a lot of light on what the French are doing.

To be clear, this document re-treads familiar ground. Gallieni, Lyautey, and the pantheon of Indochina-era COIN theorists are all present. There are endorsements of the oil spot, *quadrillage*, and *ratissage*, and talk of nomadizing units designed to bring insecurity to insurgents outside the oil spots. Yet the text is concerned with their relevance to 21st-century conflict, and it makes it clear that the context for the policy has changed. France is no longer in the business of “pacification”:

The historical method of the “oil spot” invented by Gallieni during the pacification campaigns is no longer directly transposable and must be updated. For one thing, this method corresponded to the objective of conquest, which is no longer the current goal. For another, the reduced size of ground forces no longer permits the realization of this kind of maneuver without dangerously stripping the secured zones, and it is extremely harmful to the action of the Force to let a secured zone fall into the hands of insurgents.<sup>114</sup>

This text is revealing. First, the point is no longer colonization, which was the objective of Lyautey's progressive occupation of Morocco. Second, there is the fact that the French army in 2013 was less than half its size just prior to the end of the Cold War. Without saying so directly, *Contre-insurrection* is acknowledging that there will be no more wars on the scale of Indochina, let alone Algeria. From now on, the model is Operation Bison and the war in Chad.

Critically, the document takes up the subject of politics, which Galula and his generation had stressed. As *Contre-insurrection* explained, the fact that intervention was now meant to help a

110 Lafaye, “Le génie en Afghanistan.”

111 Stéphane Taillat, “Moral Conquest Rather than Physical Conquest: Stabilisation and Counterinsurgency in French Practices and Doctrine in Afghanistan” (Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, 2009), <http://coinenirak.files.wordpress.com/2009/11/taillat-paper-rmas-esrc-seminar-091119.pdf>.

112 Élie Tenenbaum, *The Battle over Fire Support: The CAS Challenge and the Future of Artillery* (Paris: IFRI Laboratoire de Recherche sur la Défense, October 2012), 36.

113 Tenenbaum, *The Battle over Fire Support*, 36.

114 Centre interarmées de concepts, de doctrines et d'expérimentations, *Contre-insurrection* (Paris: Ministère de la Défense, 2013), 57, <http://www.guerredeFrance.fr/DOC/COIN.pdf>.

sovereign nation, rather than conquer it, did not necessarily mean that there was no revolutionary aspect to COIN:

[C]ounter-insurrection requires a clear political objective that rests on a renewed project of a “social contract” for the country or the region under consideration, in order to rival the insurgent project. It is not enough to [seek to] reestablish or even only to consider the existing order, which has shown its limits by letting an insurgency emerge and consolidate. It asks the question of the possible and desirable degree of reforming local society, as well as that of the resources available and offered for this renovation of the “social contract.”<sup>115</sup>

The difference was that in the post-colonial context, it was up to the hostnation to define and conduct its revolution. Interestingly, the doctrine addresses Hogard’s concern regarding the absence of a clear ideology, one that might counter the revolutionary message offered by insurgents. Yes, there needs to be a vision of what one is fighting for. But once again, that vision is not one the intervening forces can create. *Contre-insurrection* defines the role of the intervening forces in the narrowest terms we have seen so far:

As opposed to “pacification” associated with past experiences, COIN aims to establish the conditions that permit the restoration of the social link within a sovereign host nation. The intervention forces [i.e., the foreign intervention forces], as opposed to host nation forces], do not look to impose an alien order, to conquer and to stay in the host country, but rather to transfer as soon as possible the responsibility for security to autochthonous forces. *They only act in support of a local political structure. In any case, it is the indigenous political system that orients and even constrains their action.*<sup>116</sup>

The host nation should be the author of the political vision that guides the political action. Since Gallieni, this political vision has been identified as the more important portion of the global approach that is at the core of COIN doctrine. Now the intervening force is in the passenger seat.

It follows, of course, that only a legitimate government will succeed. “Only an autochthonous power that is legitimate in the eyes of the host-nation,” the text explains, “can carry out this alternative political project.”<sup>117</sup> Given the importance of the host nation’s legitimacy, *Contre-insurrection* — unlike the 2009 *Doctrine* and to a far greater extent than 2006 U.S. doctrine in *Counterinsurgency*, to which *Contre-insurrection* clearly owes much — narrows down the space in which the intervening force can operate. In doing so, it all but breaks with the vision of the colonial army that was in place since Lyautey and the tradition of the *Bureaux Arabes*, *groupements administratifs mobiles opérationnels* used in Indochina, and the *sections administratives spécialisées* used in Algeria. The document explains that the intervening force should:

- Respect the preeminence of the system and the political decisions of the host country;
- Understand the extremely strong interaction between their action and the political nature of the counter-insurrection;
- Promote the adherence of local leaders and the population to the political process of reconciliation;
- Support (and sometimes reinforce) the legitimacy of public powers, notably those of the local security forces, by taking every opportunity to improve their abilities, promote their ethics, and make them more responsible and raise their value in the eyes of the population;
- Enhance and assure the protection of local loyal elites (provided they are good examples), for they constitute the best connection between the population and the counter-insurrection, and the political alternative offered by the indigenous government; and
- Demonstrate great firmness toward locals at all levels that do not act respectfully of the rights of their population.<sup>118</sup>

While the intervening forces should not hand local powers a blank check, they should defer much of the work associated with the global approach to local forces. This all too often is tantamount to upholding the status quo, which contradicts the imperative to build a better future than the *status quo ante*. Also,

115 Centre interarmées de concepts, de doctrines et d’expérimentations, *Contre-insurrection*, 19.

116 Centre interarmées de concepts, de doctrines et d’expérimentations, *Contre-insurrection*, 31. Emphasis added.

117 Centre interarmées de concepts, de doctrines et d’expérimentations, *Contre-insurrection*, 19.

118 Centre interarmées de concepts, de doctrines et d’expérimentations, *Contre-insurrection*, 31–32.

the text indicates that one should not recruit local forces or militias unless it is necessary. If one has to use militias, they have to be controlled. As for hearts and minds, the French appear to have downgraded their Algeria-era psychological warfare campaigns to civil-military engagement, such as handing out soccer balls and doing medical visits. The purpose of civil-military engagement appears to be tactical and primarily geared toward facilitating relations between the force and the local population. Given that military operations typically co-exist with development work conducted by civilian governmental or non-governmental organizations, there is a presumption that civil-military engagement at most supplements their efforts but is unlikely to have the lead in development.<sup>119</sup>

*Contre-insurrection* leaves a major question unanswered: What if the host nation is not up to the challenge of conceiving of and promoting an alternative political project that would improve on the *status quo ante* and take the wind out of the insurgents' sails? What if it does the wrong things, from the point of view of the intervening nation? Also, as Guichaoua has discussed, the expectation that the host nation might "own" the policies French ministries and other outsiders prescribe seems risky, at best. Such an approach ignores the fact that international intervention, by definition, undermines the host nation's already-fragile legitimacy and makes tensions between it and its would-be helpers nearly inevitable. It is unsurprising, Guichaoua argues, that Malian protesters often focus on the issue of national sovereignty.<sup>120</sup>

There is another problem that undoubtedly would not escape French officers: The doctrine laid out by *Contre-insurrection* surrenders one's "liberty of action" to a significant degree. French military doctrine since Foch elevates liberty of action to a cardinal "principle of war."<sup>121</sup> Now, French operations are chained to the host nation's agenda, interests, and pace. The French conduct their military operations according to their own rhythm, but the more critical work, upon which the ultimate success of the entire venture depends, is in local hands.

## **Operation Barkhane: How the French Are Fighting a COIN Campaign**

In January 2013, France intervened militarily in Mali to arrest and then reverse an offensive by Islamist forces. France deployed a brigade (roughly 4,000 soldiers). The intervention, known as Operation Serval, was a remarkably conventional affair, to the almost palpable glee of the French military, which got to fight the kind of high-paced maneuver war it was built to do.<sup>122</sup> By 2014, however, the armed Islamists who survived Serval began conducting an asymmetrical campaign against French, Malian, and U.N. forces. Serval, along with the long-standing Operation Épervier in Chad, was rolled into the open-ended Operation Barkhane, which has al-

**In other words, France simply wants to get the situation to the point where it can leave matters to local forces — it does not aspire to conduct pacification in the Sahel or defeat the jihadists.**

most the entire Sahel, from Mauritania to Chad, as its area of operations. Barkhane initially had 3,500 soldiers assigned to it, but that number has slowly crept up, reaching 5,100 soldiers in early 2020. They are backed, as of Oct. 7, 2020, by seven fighter jets, three armed Reaper drones, and 22 helicopters.<sup>123</sup> Barkhane also receives support from some European nations, most notably in the form of helicopters, as well as American logistical and intelligence support. France is trying to internationalize Barkhane further through Operation Takuba, which will involve hundreds of special operations forces contributed by several European nations.

Barkhane is far more challenging than Serval. The armed groups have drawn strength from local conflicts and resentments, and their fight has evolved into overlapping insurgencies on the part

119 Col. Armel Dirou, in his memoir of his time in the Central African Republic, makes a number of references to his efforts to coordinate with non-governmental organizations and, where possible, assist them. Dirou, *Ten Thousand Lives to Save*.

120 Guichaoua, "The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel," 910.

121 Maréchal Ferdinand Foch, *Des principes de la guerre* (Paris: Economica, 2007). The most recent expression of Foch's principles of war such as "liberty of action" in French doctrine is Armée de terre, *Action terrestre future* (Paris: Ministère de la défense, 2016), 22.

122 For a detailed discussion of Serval in English, see Michael Shurkin, *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR770.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR770.html). French readers can avail themselves of the excellent memoir by Serval's first commander, Gen. Bernard Barrera, entitled *Opération Serval* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), and Jean-Christophe Notin's *La guerre de la France au Mali* (Paris: Tallandier, 2014).

123 Ministère des Armées, "Opération Barkhane," March 30, 2020, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/barkhane/dossier-de-reference/operation-barkhane>.



of several communities.<sup>124</sup> The crisis has escaped northern Mali and set central Mali, Burkina Faso, and parts of Niger ablaze. Whether or not France intended to fight a COIN campaign or is conducting its operations in a way consistent with COIN doctrine, the country is, in fact, fighting insurgencies in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, alongside the security forces of those three countries plus Mauritania and Chad. To judge at least by violent incident data published by the Armed Conflict and Event Data Project as well as periodic reports of the U.N. secretary general, the French and their local allies are losing ground.<sup>125</sup>

As for what the French are doing and how they're doing it: Official French statements hint at COIN. The objective, as stated by the French Armed Forces Ministry website, is as follows:

France's Sahelian strategy aims at helping its partner states acquire the ability to ensure their own security autonomously. It rests on a global approach (politics, security, and development), the military aspect of which is carried by Operation Barkhane, led by the French military.<sup>126</sup>

In other words, France simply wants to get the situation to the point where it can leave matters to local forces — it does not aspire to conduct pacification in the Sahel or defeat the jihadists. As for France's strategy, while the term "global approach" harkens back to Gallieni and Lyautey or the more recent *Gagner la bataille*, the reality is that the French military has assigned to itself a limited role, in a manner consistent with *Contre-insurrection*. This does not mean that France has abandoned the global approach, only that the French military has recused itself from most of what that entails. The rest falls on the shoulders of other parts of the French government, its international partners, and, above all, the Sahelian governments. Among these

entities are the French development agency, the *Agence Française de Développement*; the Coalition for the Sahel; and the G5 Sahel, which, with French encouragement, is working to improve governance alongside its security sector reform work.<sup>127</sup>

Improving governance was one of the themes the French side emphasized at the Pau Summit in January 2020, where France demonstrated the extent to which it is banking on the G5 Sahel as a way to organize and strengthen the actions of Sahelian governments and also confirm the legitimacy of French actions. France is acting as a partner, not an invader, a point French President Emmanuel Macron underscored again in June, when he convened the G5 Sahel leaders for a summit in Mauritania, and where he asked them to affirm their support for Barkhane and France's strategy — and thereby address rising anti-French sentiment in their own countries.<sup>128</sup> The French also reiterated at the June summit that the strategy of the "Sahel Coalition" included progress on four pillars: "counter-terrorism action" and "military capacity building," of course, but also "support for the return of the State and government authorities across the territory," and "official development assistance."<sup>129</sup>

Much of the important work, however, falls on the shoulders of the host nations. This includes establishing and enhancing legitimacy and rallying popular support, i.e., winning hearts and minds. As for France's contribution and that of its partners, one is reminded of Guichaoua's observations — how French bureaucracies have pushed aside the political approach favored by the 1950s COIN theorists for an ostensibly apolitical, technical approach, even when this extends to working with militias.<sup>130</sup> The implication is that the French have gone from insisting on the primacy of politics to seeking to depoliticize what is intrinsically political.

The will to step away from the overtly political and psychological activities that once typified colonial and COIN doctrine makes sense given the

124 Mamadou Bodian, Aurélien Tobie, and Myriam Marending, "The Challenges of Governance, Development and Security in the Central Regions of Mali," *SIPRI Background Paper*, no. 4 (March, 2020), [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/sipriinsight2004\\_3.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/sipriinsight2004_3.pdf); Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Militias, Armed Islamists Ravage Central Mali," Feb. 10, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/10/mali-militias-armed-islamists-ravage-central-mali>.

125 See, for example, U.N. Security Council, "Situation in Mali: Report of the Secretary-General," Sept. 29, 2020, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2020\\_952.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2020_952.pdf).

126 Ministère des Armées, "Opération Barkhane."

127 For an overview of French efforts to improve governance and foster economic development in the Sahel, see Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, "France's Action in the Sahel," April 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/terrorism-france-s-international-action/article/france-s-action-in-the-sahel>. For an overview of Alliance Sahel projects, see Alliance Sahel, "The Projects," <https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/the-projects/>.

128 Reuters, "Sahel Summit Agrees Need to Intensify Campaign Against Jihadists," *VOANews*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/sahel-summit-agrees-need-intensify-campaign-against-jihadists>; Alex Thurston, "Notes on Yesterday's G5 Security Summit in Nouakchott, Mauritania," *Sahel Blog*, July 1, 2020, <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2020/07/01/notes-on-yesterdays-g5-security-summit-in-nouakchott-mauritania/>.

129 "G5 Sahel: The Coalition Is in Place," *Gouvernement*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.gouvernement.fr/en/g5-sahel-the-coalition-is-in-place>.

130 Guichaoua, "The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel," 907–909.

Table 1: Analysis of French Army Briefings, August 2016 to March 2020

Key Word or Phrase	English Equivalent	Number of Instances	Number of Documents
Aide médicale à la population	Medical aid to the population	58	41
Au profit de la population	For the benefit of the population	64	48
CIMIC	Civil-military operations	85	30
Civilo-militaire	Civil-military	161	100
Enfant	Child	211	93
Enfant AND école	Child AND school	230	35
Population	Population	618	279

post-colonial context. How can it be otherwise? It also explains, in part, France's reluctance to intervene in Malian politics at the national political level, regardless of the fact that the French presence is a major *de facto* intervention in support of the Malian regime. At times, France seems intent to back the government of Mali. At other times, the priority is backing the Algiers Peace Process. Sometimes it flirts with armed factions and uses local proxies at the expense of Bamako. There are other examples of French meddling. Yet, it remains true that French meddling has been occasional and halting, and in no way resembles the kind of behind-the-scenes manipulation one might expect a powerful country to conduct in a puppet state. The French did not intervene in the July 2020 *putsch* that toppled President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, and as of this writing, there is no evidence that they have interfered with the subsequent political transition, beyond urging that there be one. Likewise, there have been documented instances in which French troops have worked with militias during both Serval and Barkhane.<sup>131</sup>

However, from a historical point of view, French recourse to militias in the Sahel has been limited, and French hesitation demonstrates real ambiva-

lence, which represents a significant change from colonial approaches. After all, there would be no more expeditious way for the French to shift the balance of power in their favor than by massively recruiting locals into *supplétif* regiments or even directly into French combat units as it did throughout the colonial period and more recently in Indochina and Algeria. This does not contradict Charbonneau's complaint that a few instances of collaboration with militias is too many. My point is simply to distinguish between contemporary French operations and historical ones.<sup>132</sup>

Determining the extent to which Barkhane focuses on combat operations is difficult without the privilege enjoyed by future historians who will be able to consult archival documents including unit reports. One is obliged to rely on press reporting and information provided by the French military itself, including videos posted on YouTube and the almost daily briefs posted on France's Armed Forces Ministry's website. These indicate that the French army in the Sahel divides its time between three activities. The first and most obvious are combat operations that often appear to take the form of classic cordon-and-search operations, or *ratissage* and *bouclage*, facilitated by a high degree

131 Rémi Carayol, "A la frontière entre le Niger et le Mali, l'alliance coupable de l'armée française," *Mediapart*, Nov. 29, 2018, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/291118/la-frontiere-entre-le-niger-et-le-mali-l-alliance-coupable-de-l-armee-francaise>.

132 Charbonneau, "Counterinsurgency Governance in the Sahel."

of mobility.<sup>133</sup> The mobile columns and camels of the colonial era have been replaced by state-of-the-art infantry fighting vehicles flanked by Tigre attack helicopters and over-watched by Reaper drones, but the images seen on TV reports seem very familiar:<sup>134</sup> These operations have the immediate objective of “neutralizing” terrorists and seizing essential materials like arms and ammunition. They also serve the operational objective of forcing the adversary to stay on the move and seizing and holding the initiative — an imperative in French doctrine. Holding territory, however, and doing anything like oil spots or *quadrillage*, is out of the question given the available manpower. Ideally local security forces would do that for them. Their inability to do so represents a major problem. They are too few, and they lack the kind of mobility that would help offset their numbers.

The second major activity for French troops is the conduct of what the French refer to as civil-military engagement — basically goodwill gestures toward local populations, including digging wells, providing medical services, and handing out soccer balls, etc. Judging at least from French military social media accounts as well as reporting on the subject, the French make a point of promoting these good works to the French and Sahelian publics. Journalist Rémi Carayol makes this clear in a scathing report that contrasts the image the French army promotes with its brutal interactions among a population that is tiring of its presence.<sup>135</sup> In the 1,003 briefings I obtained from the Armed Forces Ministry website, dating from August 2016 to March 2020, I found keywords associated with civil-military engagement (referred to as CIMIC) or concern for the local population in a significant number of documents (see Table 1).

However, the frequency with which these terms appear in French documents does not give us a good idea of the extent to which French forces are focused on civil-military activities as opposed to war fighting. Words like *ratissage* and others associated with combat operations appear with similar frequency. For example, the word *neutraliser* (to neutralize), which the French use to describe killing militants, appears 85 times in 67 documents. Moreover, these reports reflect what the French military

wishes the public to know — they might not convey what Barkhane entails with any accuracy.

The French army likes to think of itself as particularly good at lower intensity operations largely because of its colonial heritage and its so-called “French touch,” which involves forging close relations with local populations and accepting the higher risk that comes with living among them with minimal force protection. French forces pride themselves on their knack for “interculturality.” One often hears French officers criticize Americans for being overly concerned with force protection and too inclined to button up inside armored vehicles or behind the walls of their forward-operating bases. Americans, they say, are also too quick to resort to massive firepower. However, a few younger present and former officers have confided to me that they think the French army’s purported virtues are no longer evident. Force protection has become the priority. In Afghanistan, the French learned to quickly reach for fire support during combat, at least since the experience in Kapisa. They, too, opted for body armor, armored vehicles, and the safety of bastion walls and fire support.

Moreover, there is an important difference between today’s French army and the old colonial service: the length of tours. Lyautey complained that French officers only served two-year tours, which was barely enough time to accomplish the kind of non-kinetic work he thought so necessary. He premised his entire argument for minimizing violence on the idea that one was going to be there for a while and thus had to live among the people who were the object of one’s violence. One can see the advantage of long tours in Galula’s memoir: He accomplished as much as he did because he had time. Today, the French deploy for four months.

Finally, the third major activity for Barkhane is training local forces. The French are clearly trying to create as much distance between their current policy and colonial practices as possible. One way is by insisting on the words *partenaire* (partner) and *partenariat* (partnership). They changed the term for training foreign forces from “operational military assistance” to “operational military partnership” specifically to back away from appearing like a colonial big brother. In the Barkhane briefs posted on the

133 See, for example, France 24, “Operation Barkhane: Malian, French Troops Work Together to Push Jihadists Out,” *YouTube*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1M5bWfTbODA>; Armée française, “[Barkhane] Au coeur de l’opération,” *YouTube*, Dec. 26, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nu\\_zkIQqa-Y&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nu_zkIQqa-Y&feature=youtu.be); AFP, Au Sahel, “Barkhane bivouaque de nuit en terrain hostile,” *YouTube*, Dec. 20, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LORL9fqHrTA>; Olivier Santicchi, “Force Barkhane: le quotidien du désert,” *YouTube*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KExUJ56t4UA>; “BARKHANE; Ministère des Armées, “Bouclages, ratissages, fouilles et opération hélicoptère pour le groupement tactique désert « Acier »,” Jan. 29, 2020, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/barkhane/breves/barkhane-bouclages-ratissages-fouilles-et-operation-helicoptee-pour-le-groupement-tactique-desert-acier>.

134 The French army still operates a camel school in Djibouti.

135 Rémi Carayol, “Au Mali, les soldats français commencent à « fatiguer » les civils,” *Mediapart*, March 7, 2020, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/jean-marc-b/blog/070320/au-mali-les-soldats-francais-commencent-fatiguer-les-civils>.



Armed Forces Ministry, one rarely finds references to the Malian Armed Forces that do not insist on qualifying them as “our partners.” Indeed, in my database of briefings, I found 326 documents that contained the words *Forces Armées Maliennes* (Malian Armed Forces) together with the word *partenaire*, but only 19 documents in which *Forces Armées Maliennes* appeared without the word *partenaire*. Indeed, 500 documents contain the word *partenariat*, and the same number contain the word *partenaire*.

The French are not following the colonial pattern of raising local forces. Nor are they integrating local forces into their own ranks or forming units of *supplétifs* or *maquis* led by a *cadre* that historically might have consisted of a French officer and French non-commissioned officer. Instead, in 2013, the French left the work of training their security forces to the Malians — work which the Malians do poorly — and they also farmed efforts to bolster the Malians’ fighting skills out to the European Union’s two training missions, the European Union Training Mission in Mali and European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali. This has been a major mistake, as the missions appear to have accomplished very little at great expense.<sup>136</sup> They are no substitute for a more comprehensive effort to rebuild Mali’s security services, or for the (colonial) practice of embedding French personnel in indigenous units.

The French, frustrated with the Malian military’s progress and the mission’s contributions, are attempting to improve the situation by stepping up Barkhane’s training role and appear to be accompanying Malian units into the field more often. In 2019, in part to make up for the mission’s weakness, they initiated Operation Takuba, which seeks to enlist European partners to provide special forces to accompany Malian units.<sup>137</sup> There are many motivations behind Takuba, many of which have nothing to do with Mali. Among them are strengthening relations with different members of the European Union and Nordic nations in particular. But another motivation for Takuba is the desire to obtain the benefits of having French personnel accompany Malian units in battle while avoiding the colonial associations of that practice by getting non-French personnel to do it.

## Conclusion

Lecointre’s assertion in January 2020 that the French military knew what it was doing in the Sahel because of its colonial past is partially true. Many, if not most, French officers have some familiarity with that heritage and the COIN doctrine that emerged from it in the 1950s. Lyautey and Galula are mandatory reading in French military schools, and there’s an affinity among French officers for some of the old heroes of Indochina, men like Bigeard and Hélié de Saint-Marc. Two general officers told me to read *Fort Saganne* (a colorful novel about a young officer in the Sahara before 1914). One of them had served in Serval, and the other had served in Barkhane.

In a forthcoming memoir by Col. Armel Dirou — kindly shared with me by the author, in which Dirou writes of his tour of duty in 2014 in the Central African Republic (Operation Sangaris) — he writes of reading Lyautey and describes it as an “inspiration.”<sup>138</sup> On the other hand, it is also clear — and telling — that applying the “spirit” of Lyautey did not translate into any specific course of action, beyond an awareness of the critical importance of attending to the local population. In fact, on the same page that he cites Lyautey, Dirou explains how he tried to act in the spirit of Lyautey by reaching for American doctrine. Specifically, Dirou adopted an approach used by American provincial reconstruction teams in Afghanistan intended to guide development work and service provision.<sup>139</sup>

The Americanization of the French army takes many forms. What is colonial about Dirou’s activities are certain practices: He led an undersized force with support that was calculated to be barely sufficient; he had to take considerable risks; and he enjoyed the mixed blessing of the autonomy left to him by his superiors (*subsidiarité*). Incidentally, Dirou’s book also makes clear that what contributed most to the success of his tour of duty was not his concern for locals’ needs. Rather, it was the competence in battle of his mixed force of Legionnaires and Alpine troops which proved decisive.

Barkhane is a military operation that clearly focuses on security — rhetoric about the global ap-

136 The best recent critique of the EU’s efforts is by Denis Tull, *The European Union Training Mission and the Struggle for a New Model Army in Mali* (Paris: Institut de recherche stratégique de l’École militaire, Feb. 11, 2020), [https://ffm-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Tull-IRSEM\\_89.pdf](https://ffm-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Tull-IRSEM_89.pdf).

137 For the connection between Takuba and French frustration with the European Union Training Mission, see, Anna Schmauder, Zoë Gorman, and Flore Berger, “Takuba: A New Coalition for the Sahel?” *Clingendael Spectator*, June 30, 2020, <https://spectator.clingendael.org/nl/publicatie/takuba-new-coalition-sahel>.

138 Dirou, *Ten Thousand Lives to Save*, 28.

139 Dirou explains: “The acronym SWEAT MS CREG provided the handrail to achieve the outcomes I wanted to achieve. Therefore, I reflected on these eleven different domains: Sewage / Water / Electricity / Academic / Trash / Medical / Security / Communication / Religion / Economy / Government. The point was to define the ‘Ends’ of the mission, the ‘Ways’ I wished to employ and the ‘Means’ to deliver my effects.” Dirou, *Ten Thousand Lives to Save*, 28.


proach and shared tactics with COIN campaigns notwithstanding. There is an unmistakable family resemblance between Barkhane and the colonial campaigns of the *Belle Époque*, but that resemblance is superficial. The French military has recused itself from political activities in order to focus exclusively on combat operations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the French army is doing even less hearts and minds-oriented activities than its doctrine suggests. One senior officer complained, for example, that the French army hands out medals for combat, but not for civil-military engagement or for de-escalating a situation so as to avert recourse to arms. Galula made the same observation 50 years earlier: He complained he won no awards for his pacification work when it was the success of that work that prevented him from getting into battles that might have won him medals.<sup>140</sup> Given the post-colonial context in which the French military is operating, however, Barkhane's focus is appropriate.

As for the overall French strategy, the criticism that it is overly focused on security appears valid. However, it is difficult to accurately judge the relative proportions of the civilian versus military side of the effort, given the number of entities involved in the former and the much greater visibility of the latter. There are a lot of people and organizations doing a lot of things in support of France's global approach. Knowing what it all adds up to is a challenge. Judging from what happened in Afghanistan, the whole may add up to less than the sum of the parts. That said, French strategy suffers from the same internal contradictions that have applied to many post-colonial military interventions. The success of France's operations depends on political changes that it refuses to impose itself, and frequently, its actions serve to perpetuate a political dispensation that is a principle driver of conflict. While aspiring to be apolitical and declining to meddle in the internal affairs of sovereign nations, France is, wittingly or not, profoundly affecting the political landscape. Moreover, when France does meddle, it risks undermining the host nation's legitimacy in the eyes of the population.

Every French army officer and Foreign Affairs Ministry official will say that military action can lead to nothing outside of an appropriate political framework, and that security operations may be necessary but are never sufficient to foster an enduring peace. However, they do not know how to act politically without being political. As Guichaoua

has observed, this dilemma expresses itself in a trend toward an ostensibly apolitical and technical approach to COIN-related activities. Concern for politics is replaced by attention to governance, usually understood in terms of service provision. Gian Gentile and other critics of COIN have complained that this amounts to nation-building, which is something they believe the U.S. military should not be in the business of doing.<sup>141</sup> Would it were true: Nation-building is not about service provision. Rather, it is about ideas, identities, culture, and politics.

These internal contradictions are not exclusive to French interventions, though the French arguably have an advantage over Americans. As *Contre-insurrection* demonstrates, the French are aware of the fundamental differences between colonial and post-colonial contexts and the unsuitability of colonial approaches for today's conflicts. They understand that Galula, no less than Trinquier, Hogard, Gallieni, or Lyautey, was fighting to extend and preserve colonial dominion. They also understand that the permanence of the French presence is their best argument for winning over local populations. American readers of Galula arguably forgot the colonial context in which he wrote, just as they appear to have overlooked his interest in politics and ideology. They are, it seems, unaware of the basic problem of trying to sway a population to one's side, ostensibly on behalf of another government, while refraining from "meddling" and broadcasting the intention to leave as soon as possible.

French strategy in the Sahel might yet work. But it will take a long time, and it is not clear why anyone should expect otherwise. In the meantime, France will be tempted to be more colonial, in the sense that it will want to intervene in politics more directly. Alternatively, it might risk doing less, and perhaps let Sahelian governments feel more anxious about their fate. It has no good options. From an American point of view, it is refreshing to see how modest French ambitions are given the U.S. propensity for dreaming big. Dirou, in his unpublished memoir, references Foch's arguments about seizing opportunities to act decisively. In modern conflicts, Dirou writes in his manuscript: "We might consider a decisive battle as one of which the product is the opening up of immediate strategic possibilities with the potential to influence profoundly the course of events in an enduring fashion."<sup>142</sup> Right now, the French are aiming for little more than creating "strategic possibilities" in the hope that its partners might exploit them. 

140 Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, 65, 179.

141 Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*.

142 Dirou, *Ten Thousand Lives to Save*, 89.

**Michael Shurkin** is a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, where he has written extensively on French doctrine and military operations, as well as the conflict in Mali and security sector reform. He is the author or co-author of France's War in Mali (2014), Achieving Peace in Northern Mali (2015), Mali's Next Battle (2017), and Building Armies, Building Nations (2017), among other works. In 2019, he participated in an exchange with the French army's doctrine center. Prior to joining RAND, Dr. Shurkin served as a political analyst in the Central Intelligence Agency. He has a Ph.D. in modern European history from Yale University and studied at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and Stanford University.

Image: Fred Marie/CC-BY-NC-ND 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>)