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A legitimate sphere of influence: Understanding France's turn to multilateralism in Africa

Stefano Recchia

Department of Political Science, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX, USA

ABSTRACT
Scholars argue that the 1991 Gulf War, when the United States worked hard to secure approval from the United Nations (UN), set a precedent for legitimate military intervention that other states, especially other liberal democracies, subsequently felt compelled to follow. France, however, continued to intervene unilaterally in its traditional African sphere of influence for several years, without seeking approval from the UN or regional bodies. Even after France drew widespread opprobrium for its support of a murderous regime in Rwanda, French leaders deployed thousands of combat troops unilaterally on various missions. This article relies on original interviews with French policymakers as well as on primary documents to make the case that the 2002–04 Côte d'Ivoire intervention finally steered French Africa policy towards greater multilateralism. It drove home the danger that unilateral interventions could fuel anti-French sentiment among African audiences, undermining France's regional influence. Ultimately, therefore, concerns about African acceptance more than broader international pressure led France to fully embrace new norms of legitimate intervention.

KEYWORDS Military intervention; international legitimacy; unilateralism; United Nations Security Council; Rwanda; operation Turquoise; operation Licorne

France remains one of the world's most interventionist countries. It launched five major interventions in Africa over the last decade – in Libya (2011), Côte d'Ivoire (2011), Mali (2013), and the Central African Republic (2013), as well as an extensive counterterrorism operation code-named 'Barkhane' (2014) that encompasses several countries in the Sahel region and remains ongoing at the time of writing. All these interventions were endorsed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and/or regional multilateral bodies, either in advance or within weeks of the initial deployment. For example, France's Operation Serval in Mali, launched in early 2013 to push back radical Islamists, was swiftly endorsed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the UNSC subsequently authorised the use of 'all necessary means' by French forces. Later that year, France intervened in the Central

CONTACT Stefano Recchia srecchia@smu.edu Department of Political Science, Southern Methodist University, PO Box 750117, Dallas, TX 75275, USA

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African Republic (CAR), having secured prior UN approval, to prevent ethnic violence in the country from spiralling out of control.[1] The French troops deployed in Operation Barkhane (numbering 5,100 as of early 2020) were invited by a subregional organisation, the G5 Sahel, and the effort was subsequently blessed by the UNSC.[2]

Why has France sought the approval of global and regional multilateral bodies for its recent military interventions in Africa? According to a prominent argument, the link between legitimate intervention and multilateral approval was firmly established with the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Washington's efforts to obtain UNSC approval on that occasion, writes Thomas Risse, 'established a precedent' that other states, especially other liberal democracies, subsequently felt compelled to follow.[3] The Gulf War precedent made it 'inconceivable', Risse claims, that other 'Western great powers … [would henceforth] intervene militarily to pursue unilaterally defined strategic interests in any part of the world'.[4] In other words, US policy in 1991 re-framed the parameters of legitimate intervention and socialised other liberal democracies into a new hegemonic international order.[5]

Had Washington's attempt at hegemonic socialisation been entirely successful, no liberal democracy – let alone any close US ally – should have intervened unilaterally after 1991. However, for several years, France under presidents François Mitterrand (1981–95) and Jacques Chirac (1995–2007) continued to intervene in sub-Saharan Africa without seeking multilateral approval. France's interventions were typically justified on the basis of bilateral defence treaties concluded after decolonisation with allied regimes across Francophone Africa, as well as of related requests for assistance by embattled strongmen. French policymakers had long viewed relations with Francophone Africa as a family affair, and the frequent military interventions intended to maintain stability there appeared ipso facto legitimate when viewed from Paris.

[1]On the Mali and CAR interventions, see Gregor Mathias, *Les guerres africaines de François Hollande* (Tour-d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube 2014), 66–71; and Benedikt Erforth, *Contemporary French Security Policy in Africa: On Ideas and Wars* (London: Palgrave 2020), 84–142.

[2]Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces, French Senate, 'France's External Interventions: Strengthening Military Effectiveness through a Comprehensive and Coordinated Approach', Report no. 794, 13 July 2016, 52, available at https://www.senat.fr/rap/r15-794/r15-7941.pdf; Marie Bourreau, 'G5 Sahel: Vote à l'arraché sur le déploiement d'une force africaine', *Le Monde*, 21 June 2017; and Leila Abboud, 'France to send 600 extra troops to Africa's Sahel region', *Financial Times*, 2 Feb. 2020.

[3]Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Between a New World Order and None: Explaining the Reemergence of the United Nations in World Politics', in Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams (eds.), *Critical Security Studies* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press 1997), 279. For similar arguments, see also Bruce Russett, 'The Gulf War as Empowering the United Nations', in John O'Loughlin, Tom Mayer and Edward S. Greenberg (eds.), *War and Its Consequences: Lessons from the Persian Gulf Conflict* (NY: Harper Collins 1994), 185–97; and Bruce Cronin, 'The Paradox of Hegemony: America's Ambiguous Relationship with the United Nations', *European Journal of International Relations* 7/1 (2001), 119–20. Scholars subscribing to a rationalist epistemology, too, often embrace this view at least implicitly; see, for example, Erik Voeten, 'The Political Origins of the UN Security Council's Ability to Legitimize the Use of Force', *International Organization* 59/3 (2005), 531–32.

[4]Risse-Kappen, 'Between a New World Order and None', 288.

[5]See esp. Cronin, 'The Paradox of Hegemony', 105.

France's experience in Rwanda during the early 1990s, when President Mitterrand intervened unilaterally in support of a Francophone regime that subsequently became implicated in a genocide, is often seen as a watershed. Scholars argue that the resulting international opprobrium hurt France's self-esteem and steered its Africa policy towards greater multilateralism.[6] Yet even after Rwanda, French policymakers deployed thousands of combat troops unilaterally to the Comoros Islands, Cameroon, the CAR, and Côte d'Ivoire (see Table 1). It was not until the early 2000s that French leaders fully accepted the need to secure approval for their African interventions from the UNSC and regional bodies. I argue that the 2002–04 Côte d'Ivoire intervention, initially launched without multilateral backing, was the decisive turning point. It belatedly drove home the danger that in a context of growing mass-popular mobilisation across Africa, unilateral interventions could be exploited by nationalist elites within the target state and in neighbouring countries to fuel anti-French sentiment, undermining France's regional influence. Ultimately, therefore, concerns about African acceptance more than broader international pressure and opprobrium led France to fully embrace new norms of legitimate intervention.

This article focuses on the institutional, or organisational, dimension of multilateralism. For the purpose of this article, multilateralism involves the formal approval of standing international organisations with mandates in the field of international security – primarily the UNSC, but also regional bodies such as ECOWAS and the African Union (AU).[7] To identify causal mechanisms and pathways, I rely on historical process tracing.[8] I derive the evidence for the analysis presented here primarily from more than a dozen interviews that I conducted with French government officials who served in senior foreign policy positions during the period under consideration.[9] Evidence from interviews is sometimes problematic, as personal memories may be clouded by hindsight. Nevertheless, interviews with senior officials are often the only way to reconstruct the motives and process that resulted in major policy changes.

[6]See, for example, Shaun Gregory, 'The French Military in Africa: Past and Present', *African Affairs* 99/396 (2000), 441–42; Adrian Treacher, *French Interventionism: Europe's Last Global Player?* (Farnham: Ashgate 2003); Daniel Bourmaud, 'From Unilateralism to Multilateralism: The Decline of French Power in Africa', in Tony Chafer and Gordon Cumming (eds.), *From Rivalry to Partnership? New Approaches to the Challenges of Africa* (Farnham: Ashgate 2011), 49–51; and Tony Chafer, Gordon Cumming, and Roel Van der Velde, 'France's Interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A Historical Institutionalist Perspective', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, this special issue.

[7]On the distinction between institutions-based (or 'qualitative') and coalitions-based (or 'quantitative') multilateralism, see Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 2003), 80–81.

[8]See Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel (eds.), *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytical Tool* (NY: Cambridge UP 2015).

[9]This includes three permanent representatives to the UNSC: Jean-Bernard Mérimée (1991–95), Jean-David Levitte (2000–02), and Jean-Marc de La Sablière (2002–07); two chiefs of the military staff of the French president who subsequently also served as chiefs of the French defence staff: Henri Bentégeat (1999–2002, 2002–06) and Edouard Guillaud (2002–10, 2010–14); and several presidential advisers on African affairs: Bruno Joubert (2007–09), Hélène le Gal (2012–16), and Thomas Mélonio (2016–17).

Table 1. France's military interventions in Africa, 1989–2019.

Target country, operation code name	Launch date	Multilateral endorsement: Organisation and date	Mission objectives
Comoros Islands (Operation Oside)	7 December 1989	None	Restore stability after attempted rebel takeover
Gabon (Operation Requin)	23 May 1990	None	Restore stability in major cities during civil unrest
Rwanda (Operation Noroît)	4 October 1990	None	Support Hutu government in the face of attempted takeover by Tutsi rebels
Togo (Operation Verdier)	28 November 1991	None	Separate belligerents after breakdown of power-sharing government
Djibouti (Operation Iskoutir)	February 1992	None	Provide humanitarian assistance; support government
Rwanda (Operation Turquoise)	23 June 1994	**UNSC** (Res. 929, 22/6/1994)	Protect civilians; establish humanitarian safe zone in southwestern Rwanda
Comoros Islands (Operation Azalée)	29 September 1995	None	Prevent attempted rebel takeover
Cameroon (Operation Aramis)	17 February 1996	None	Support national government in border dispute with Nigeria
CAR (Operation Almandin)	8 April 1996	None	Foil attempted army mutiny; restore stability
Côte d'Ivoire (Operation Licorne)	22 September 2002	**ECOWAS** (26/1/2003);[a] **UNSC** (Res. 1464, 4/2/2003)	Separate rebel and government forces; protect civilians
Democratic Republic of the Congo (Operation Artemis)	12 June 2003	**UNSC** (Res. 1484, 30/5/2003); **EU** (5/6/2003)[b]	Restore stability in and around the city of Bunia; contribute to civilian protection
Chad (EUFOR Chad-CAR)	28 January 2008	**UNSC** (Res. 1778, 25/9/2007); **EU** (15/10/2007)[c]	Prevent cross-border rebel movements; contribute to civilian protection
Libya (Operation Harmattan)	19 March 2011	**Arab League** (12/3/2011);[d] **UNSC** (Res. 1793, 17/3/2011)	Protect civilians
Côte d'Ivoire (Operation Licorne II)	2 April 2011	**ECOWAS** (24/12/2010);[e] **UNSC** (Res. 1975, 30/3/2011)	Protect civilians; facilitate enforcement of electoral outcome
Mali (Operation Serval)	11 January 2013	**ECOWAS** (19/1/2013);[f] **UNSC** (Res. 2100, 25/4/2013)	Prevent rebel takeover of capital, Bamako; help stabilise the country
CAR (Operation Sangaris)	5 December 2013	**AU** (13/11/2013);[g] **UNSC** (Res. 2127, 5/12/2013)	Protect civilians
Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger (Operation Barkhane)	31 July 2014	**G5 Sahel** (8/2014);[h] **UNSC** (Res. 2227, 29/5/2015; Res. 2359, 21/6/2017)	Support national governments in counterterrorism operations

Sources: French Ministry of Defence, '50 Ans d'Opex en Afrique, 1964–2014', *Cahier du RETEX* (Paris: 2014); Committee on Foreign Affairs, French National Assembly, 'Engagement and Diplomacy: What Doctrine for Our Military Interventions?', Report no. 2777, annex I, 20 May 2015, available at http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/pdf/rap-info/i2777.pdf

[a]UN, 'Conclusions of the Conference of Heads of State on Côte d'Ivoire' (Paris: 25–26 Jan. 2003), Doc. S/2003/99, available at https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CI_030126_Paris%20Conclusions.pdf/.

[b]EU Council, 'Joint Action 2003/423/CFSP on the European Union Military Operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo' (Brussels: 5 June 2003), available at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32003E0423&from=EN.

[c]EU Council, 'Joint Action 2007/677/CFSP on the European Union Military Operation in the Republic of Chad and in the Central African Republic' (Brussels: 15 Oct. 2007), available at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32007E0677&from=EN.

[d]Arab League, 'Outcome of the Council Meeting at the Ministerial Level in its Extraordinary Session on the Implications of the Current Events in Libya' (Cairo: 12 Mar. 2011), available at http://responsibilitytoprotect.org/Arab%20League%20Ministerial%20level%20statement%2012%20march%202011%20-%20english(1).pdf

[e]ECOWAS, 'Extraordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government on Côte d'Ivoire', final communiqué (Abuja: 24 Dec. 2010), available at http://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2010-24-december-Extra.pdf

[f]ECOWAS, 'Extraordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government', final communiqué (Abidjan: 19 Jan. 2013), available at https://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2013-Extra-Jan-Mali.pdf

[g]AU, 'Decision of the Peace and Security Council on the situation in the Central African Republic', 406th meeting (Addis Ababa: 13 Nov. 2013), available at http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/auc-psc-com-406-car-13-11-2013.pdf

[h]Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces, French Senate, 'France's External Interventions: Strengthening Military Effectiveness through a Comprehensive and Coordinated Approach', Report no. 794, 13 July 2016, 52, available at https://www.senat.fr/rap/r15-794/r15-7941.pdf

Wherever feasible, I triangulate the evidence from interviews with information from official documents, published memoirs, and secondary sources.

The article proceeds as follows: The first part lays out my argument about multilateralism as a tool to reduce nationalist pushback against foreign intervention. The second part briefly reviews the history of French interventions in Africa, discusses the 1994 Rwanda episode, and then examines the immediate post-Rwanda years – finding evidence of some change in France's approach to intervention during this period but also of significant continuity. The third part zeroes in on the Côte d'Ivoire intervention of 2002–04. I show that, after initially intervening unilaterally, policymakers in Paris gradually realised that they needed multilateral backing for their military presence in Côte d'Ivoire, primarily to soften nationalist opposition from within the country. The conclusion emphasises the profound impact that the Côte d'Ivoire experience has had on France's subsequent interventions in sub-Saharan Africa.

Multilateralism to reduce nationalist pushback

The conventional view is that since the early 1990s, the world's liberal powers have sought multilateral approval for their military interventions, to 'demonstrate that their purpose in intervening … is joined in some way to community interests'.[10] Scholars of US intervention more specifically hypothesise that multilateral approval is valuable because it (a) increases domestic support at home;[11] (b) reduces the risk of opposition from third-party states across the world;[12] and (c) facilitates operational burden sharing with allies and partners.[13] Powerful interveners other than the United States, however, may seek multilateral approval for slightly different reasons.

In the case of France, presidents enjoy wide latitude when it comes to intervening abroad. The National Assembly in Paris typically approves French interventions as a matter of course, and in the absence of elite contestation there is usually little opposition from the French public – making it unlikely that the government will seek multilateral approval to manage domestic opposition.[14] Likewise, French interventions, even when lacking multilateral approval, have for the most part

[10]Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, 82.

[11]Joseph Grieco et al., 'Let's Get a Second Opinion: International Institutions and American Public Support for War', *International Studies Quarterly* 55/2 (2011), 563–83; and Terrence L. Chapman, *Securing Approval: Domestic Politics and Multilateral Authorization for War* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press 2011).

[12]Voeten, 'The Political Origins'; and Alexander Thompson, 'Coercion through IOs: The Security Council and the Logic of Information Transmission', *International Organization* 60/1 (2006), 1–34.

[13]Sarah Kreps, *Coalitions of Convenience: United States Military Interventions after the Cold War* (NY: Oxford UP 2011); and Stefano Recchia, *Reassuring the Reluctant Warriors: US Civil-Military Relations and Multilateral Intervention* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 2015).

[14]This was confirmed in author interviews with several French officials. For example, according to Hélène le Gal, President Hollande's senior adviser for African affairs from 2012 to 2016, the president 'never thought that French civil society and public opinion had much influence' in this respect. Author interview, Paris, 28 Mar. 2017. On the National Assembly's role, see Falk Ostermann, 'France's Reluctant Parliamentarisation of Military Deployments: The 2008 Constitutional Reform in Practice', *West European Politics* 40/1 (2017), 101–18.

been legal under international law (they have typically been carried out at the request of the target state's recognised government), and thus have tended to elicit only scant opposition from third-party states around the world.[15] A desire to share operational burdens has probably contributed to steering France's Africa policy in a multilateral direction.[16] However, Paris has experienced significant resource constraints since at least the mid-1970s, when France's post-war economic boom ended. Hence, the burden-sharing imperative has been a constant for almost half a century, whereas France's shift to multilateralism in Africa has been much more recent. Furthermore, burden sharing can be achieved outside of formal institutional channels. Therefore, the burden-sharing imperative alone cannot adequately explain why France now generally seeks institutional approval for its military interventions.

I argue that France has come to recognise the value of UNSC and regional approval for its African interventions, primarily as a *means to counter nationalist opposition and accusations of neocolonialism from African audiences* – often from within the target state. The approval of multilateral institutions can have several benefits in this respect. First, it helps reassure sceptics in the target state and the broader region that an intervention, far from being narrowly self-serving, is likely to improve conditions for the local population. UN approval and involvement, in particular, can be expected to signal that the intervention's objective is not to deny self-determination, but instead to advance the goals of national sovereignty, democracy, and human rights. Second, multilateral approval can signal that an intervention is likely to be limited in both scope and duration – especially when the multilateral mandate explicitly foresees a future handoff to a UN or regional peacekeeping mission. Third, multilateral approval involves a de facto international recognition of France's leadership role in policing its regional sphere of influence (including, perhaps, from states that have traditionally been suspicious of French interference), offering an additional level of insulation against pushback by local populists and nationalists. Fourth, multilateral approval and participation can be viewed as an insurance policy that helps France share the blame in case of major missteps and ultimate mission failure.

In short, I argue that concerns about pushback from within France's regional sphere of influence have done more to steer Paris's Africa policy towards multilateralism than either concerns about domestic support among French audiences, pressure and opprobrium from the global community, or a desire for burden sharing. Multilateralism is of course no

[15]On the legality of intervention by invitation, see Gregory Fox, 'Intervention by Invitation', in Marc Weller (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Use of Force in International Law* (NY: Oxford UP 2015), 816–40.

[16]See Alice Pannier and Olivier Schmitt, 'To Fight another Day: France between the Fight against Terrorism and Future Warfare', *International Affairs* 95/5 (2019), 897; and Thierry Tardy, 'France's Military Operations in Africa: Between Institutional Pragmatism and Agnosticism', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, this issue.

guarantee that a military intervention will be viewed as legitimate by local audiences within the target state and in neighbouring countries. As David Edelstein notes, 'multilateralism alone cannot overcome the challenges of nationalism'.[17] In particular, whether or not the target state's population accepts a foreign military presence is likely to depend to a significant degree on the ability of that foreign presence to offer adequate protection against internal and external threats.[18] Nevertheless, multilateralism can be expected to make it more difficult for radical political actors in the target state, who may view the intervention as jeopardising their own maximalist agenda, to whip up nationalist sentiment against the intervener. Multilateralism is also likely to offer at least some level of insurance against failure. As such, it can be appealing to interveners confronted with the risk of nationalist pushback.

France's postcolonial African domain

France's maintenance of a sphere of influence in sub-Saharan Africa, together with its nuclear deterrent and permanent membership on the UNSC, has been central to its continued claim to great-power status. French foreign policy elites generally believe that their 'country's ties to Africa … are a chance for a multipolar vision of international relations and lie at the heart of France's global vocation'.[19]

After France formally lost its African empire in the early 1960s, it continued to wield substantial influence in the region through a complex network of patron-client relationships. France offered political, military, and financial support to weak African rulers. In exchange, these nominally independent rulers accepted France's right to be consulted on major policy decisions; outsourced their external defence and monetary policy to the former colonial metropole; granted it privileged access to raw materials and the domestic market in goods; and for the most part supported French positions in various international fora.[20] The main pillar of France's postcolonial system of influence was a series of bilateral defence and military cooperation agreements concluded with more than a dozen Francophone countries. These agreements in many cases allowed the permanent garrisoning of French troops on African soil, and they legally authorised French military intervention at the

[17]David Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards: Success and Failure in Military Occupation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 2008), 137.
[18]Ibid., 151.
[19]Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces, French Senate, 'Crisis Management in Sub-Saharan Africa', Report no. 450, 30 June 2006, 10, available at https://www.senat.fr/rap/r05-450/r05-4501.pdf. See also Treacher, *French Interventionism*, ch. 7.
[20]Treacher, *French Interventionism*, 124–25; and Elizabeth Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa: From the Cold War to the War on Terror* (NY: Cambridge UP 2013), 175–79.

request of African leaders in case of external aggression and (by means of secret clauses) domestic unrest.[21]

From 1960 to 1991, France conducted more than three dozen military interventions in 16 African countries – primarily with the goal of buttressing weak rulers against domestic opposition.[22] Because France's postcolonial sphere of influence relied, to a significant degree, on the acceptance and cooperation of Francophone ruling elites, upholding the credibility of French security guarantees – by means of military assistance and frequent interventions – became a central concern of policymakers in Paris.

This concern with credibility took on added importance from the 1970s onwards, as French policymakers felt they needed to ward off Soviet, Libyan and, increasingly, US encroachments on their country's African *pré carré* (private domain).[23] The preferred form of military intervention from the perspective of French leaders was short in-and-out missions, often involving only a few hundred troops.[24] Through the Cold War, France's small-scale military interventions in Africa appeared to offer a relatively low-risk, low-cost means of affirming its great-power status. Louis de Guiringaud, France's foreign minister in the late 1970s, famously quipped that in sub-Saharan Africa, France could 'still … change the course of history with 500 men'.[25]

Cracks in the system

Significant change occurred in the politics of Francophone Africa between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Increasing bottom-up demands from popular opposition movements, together with top-down governance conditionalities attached to multilateral financial aid, put pressure on the region's ageing autocrats to open up calcified political systems and allow multi-party elections – often for the first time since independence.[26] Several of the region's incumbent rulers, determined to hold on to power, reacted by playing the ethnic card: in countries as diverse as Cameroon, the CAR, Chad, Gabon, and Togo, entrenched leaders cynically fanned communal tensions to rally support from their own ethnic kin while sidelining and dividing the opposition.[27]

[21] Pierre Lellouche and Dominique Moisi, 'French Policy in Africa: A Lonely Battle against Destabilization', *International Security* 3/4 (1979), 111–14. For an up-to-date discussion based on declassified documents, see also Marco Wyss, *Postcolonial Security: Britain, France, and West Africa's Cold War* (Oxford UP forthcoming).

[22] Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa*, 180.

[23] Signalling credible commitment was among the main drivers of French interventions in Zaire in the 1970s, Chad in the 1980s, and Rwanda in the early 1990s. See Nathaniel Powell, 'Battling Instability? The Recurring Logic of French Military Interventions in Africa', *African Security* 10/1 (2017), 52–53.

[24] Lellouche and Moisi, 'French Policy in Africa', 122; and Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa*, 182–88.

[25] Quoted in Jean-François Bayart, ''*Bis repetita*': La politique africaine de François Mitterrand de 1989 à 1995', in Samy Cohen (ed.), *Mitterrand et la sortie de la guerre froide* (Paris: PUF 1998), 275.

[26] Jean-Pierre Bat, *Le syndrome Foccart: La politique française en Afrique, de 1959 à nos jours* (Paris: Folio 2012), 507–8.

[27] Powell, 'Battling Instability?', 60–61; and Bayart, '*Bis repetita*', 265–67.

Faced with this radical new challenge, policymakers in Paris appeared to be of two minds. On the one hand, President Mitterrand, prodded by reformists within his Socialist Party, declared during the Franco-African summit at La Baule in June 1990 that France's bilateral economic aid, too, would henceforth be tied to democratic reforms; on the other hand, French leaders sought to reassure their African allies by telling them privately that there was no hurry – domestic reforms could be gradual and carefully managed.[28] Overall, 'Mitterrand was obsessed with France's loss of influence in Africa, and he remained stuck in a paternalistic mindset', recalls the French Socialist Party's former coordinator for African affairs.[29]

Mass ethnic politics and the Rwandan tragedy

President Mitterrand and his defence advisers clung to the belief that letting Francophone African rulers be overthrown would harm the credibility of France's security guarantees and undermine its regional influence.[30] Accordingly, when opposition movements in Francophone Africa turned violent, Mitterrand did not hesitate to intervene militarily – ostensibly to protect French nationals but in fact mainly to prop up the established political order. Between 1989 and 1992 alone, hundreds of French troops were dispatched to the Comoros, Gabon, Togo, and Djibouti to help maintain political stability.[31] Policymakers in Paris considered these military operations to be legally justified on the basis of existing bilateral defence and military cooperation agreements, and no effort was made to involve the UNSC or regional multilateral bodies.[32] In Togo, in 1991 and 1992, the French military's awkward attempts to deter both sides in a domestic conflict and its failure to avert violent repression by the embattled ruler, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, for the first time resulted in significant anti-French protests; but the crisis was defused after (rigged) elections in 1993 reconfirmed Eyadéma in power.[33]

[28]Bat, *Syndrome Foccart*, 507–10; and Bayart, '*Bis repetita*', 263–66.

[29]Author interview with Guy Labertit (chief African affairs coordinator, French Socialist Party, 1993–2006), Vitry-sur-Seine, 21 Mar. 2017.

[30]Hubert Védrine (secretary-general to the French presidency, 1991–95), statement before the French Parliamentary Information Commission on Rwanda (henceforth, PICR), 5 May 1998. All statements by French officials before this commission are available at http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/11/dossiers/rwanda/telechar/telechar.asp. On Mitterrand's concerns about credibility, see also Louis Gautier, 'Les guerres de François Mitterrand', *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps* 101/1 (2011): 64–70.

[31]Gautier, 'Les guerres de François Mitterrand', 66. On Gabon and Togo, see also Bat, *Syndrome Foccart*, 514–22.

[32]Author interview with Jean-Marc de La Sablière (deputy director [1985–89] and director [1992–96] of African affairs, French Foreign Ministry; deputy perm-rep [1989–92] and perm-rep [2002–07] of France to the UNSC), Paris, 10 Dec. 2014.

[33]Bat, *Syndrome Foccart*, 521–23.

The inherent tensions between Africa's new high-energy politics based on (ethnic) mass mobilisation and France's deeply conservative instincts finally exploded in Rwanda, a former Belgian colony incorporated into France's sphere of influence only in the 1970s. France had signed a military assistance agreement with Rwanda in 1973, after Maj Gen Juvenal Habyarimana, an ethnic Hutu, took power in a bloodless coup. The country had long experienced strained relationships between majority Hutus and minority Tutsis, going back to Belgium's colonial strategy of divide and rule; however, for almost three decades, ethnic tensions were largely kept under control.[34] This tenuous ethnic peace broke down in the early 1990s, as Habyarimana, with French support, sought to manage the twofold challenge of fighting a foreign-backed insurgency while implementing wide-ranging domestic reforms.

In October 1990, the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF), a mainly Tutsi rebel organisation, invaded Rwanda from neighbouring Uganda, supported by elements of the Ugandan army.[35] The RPF's goal was to topple Habyarimana and seize power in the Rwandan capital, Kigali. Mitterrand and his senior advisers quickly concluded that allowing Habyarimana to be overthrown would discredit France's security guarantees, potentially setting off a chain reaction of regional destabilisation that could weaken Paris's hold over its African domain.[36] Within days, Mitterrand dispatched about 300 French troops (subsequently increased to 600) to bolster Habyarimana.[37] Pursuant to the terms of the military assistance agreement, French forces were not supposed to engage in combat against the RPF; but in practice, from 1990 to 1993, French soldiers repeatedly went so far as to select targets and aim artillery, with Rwandan government troops often just left to pull the trigger.[38]

At the same time, during this period French leaders put significant pressure on Habyarimana to 'establish a pluralist political system'.[39] Policymakers in Paris believed that political reform in Rwanda would reduce popular support for the RPF.[40] President Habyarimana, however, reacted by playing up the Tutsi threat in an effort to divide the opposition and rally his supporters. By 1992, after growing reports of ethnic violence, most Western donors

[34]Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (London: Hurst 1997), 47–83.
[35]Prunier, *Rwanda Crisis*, 93–98, 115–19.
[36]Védrine, statement before PICR; Bruno Delaye (African affairs adviser to the French president, 1992–95), statement before PICR, 19 May 1998.
[37]Prunier, *Rwanda Crisis*, 100–10; and Daniela Kroslak, *The French Betrayal of Rwanda* (Bloomington: Indiana UP 2008), 127–31.
[38]As acknowledged by Adm Jacques Lanxade (chief of the French defence staff, 1991–95) in an interview with François Granier, *La Nuit Rwandaise* 10 (2016), 105, available at http://www.lanuitrwandaise.org. See also Kroslak, *French Betrayal of Rwanda*, 134–39.
[39]French Presidency, 'Notes re. meeting with Mr. Juvenal Habyarimana', 22 Apr. 1991, 6, available at https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB461/docs/DOCUMENT%209%20-%20French.pdf; also Jean-Michel Marlaud (French ambassador to Rwanda, 1993–94), statement before PICR, 19 May 1998.
[40]Prunier, *Rwanda Crisis*, 89–91.

distanced themselves from the Habyarimana regime. In contrast, Paris continued to support its ally diplomatically and militarily – thus de facto condoning the regime's growing extremism.[41]

Experimenting with UN involvement

Gradually, President Mitterrand and his advisers realised that France had become trapped in a devilish conflict in Rwanda that Paris was unlikely to be able to resolve on its own. Consequently, in early 1993, Mitterrand concluded that the most viable exit strategy for French troops would consist in internationalising the problem – by involving mediators from other countries to broker a power-sharing agreement and then handing off longer-term stabilisation to a UN peacekeeping force.[42] As Jean-Marc de La Sablière, then the director of African affairs at the French Foreign Ministry, explains: 'We had to bring in the United Nations. We had to withdraw, because there was such mistrust towards France from the RPF that we were no longer in a position where we could influence things and facilitate a compromise'.[43]

France's retrenchment strategy at first appeared poised for success. The Rwandan government and the RPF signed a peace agreement in the Tanzanian town of Arusha on 4 August 1993 that (a) committed the two parties to set up a national power-sharing government, and (b) called for the deployment of UN peacekeepers.[44] French troops from the bilateral assistance mission withdrew in December 1993, after peacekeepers from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) had started deploying.[45]

In the spring of 1994, however, hopes that UNAMIR could help stabilise Rwanda quickly evaporated. On 6 April, President Habyarimana was killed when his plane was shot down, most likely by radicals from his own camp who were opposed to the peace agreement.[46] Within hours, Hutu militias such as the fearsome Interhamwe set up roadblocks in Kigali, and the genocide began – leading to the slaughter of an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus within weeks.[47]

[41]Bayart, '*Bis repetita*', 269–70; and Powell, 'Battling Instability?', 61.

[42]On 3 March 1993, Mitterrand declared in a meeting of the defence council that 'we need to withdraw, but we need to do so going through the United Nations. We can't just leave like that'. Available at https://francegenocidetutsi.org/ConseilRestreint3mars1993NotesVedrine.pdf. On the decision to seek a UN handoff, see also Delaye, statement before PICR.

[43]De La Sablière, author interview.

[44]Olivier Lanotte, *La France au Rwanda, 1990–1994* (Brussels: Peter Lang 2007), 92–100; and Kroslak, *French Betrayal of Rwanda*, 40–45.

[45]Prunier, *Rwanda Crisis*, 203–4.

[46]Official French sources long blamed the RPF, but declassified documents show that France's external intelligence agency almost immediately placed the responsibility on Hutu extremists. See special report by Radio France Internationale, 6 Feb. 2019, at https://www.franceculture.fr/droit-justice/genocide-au-rwanda-une-note-confidentielle-contredit-la-version-francaise.

[47]'Rwanda Genocide', *BBC News*, 7 Apr. 2014, at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-26875506/.

A French-led 'humanitarian intervention'?

By mid-May 1994, as detailed news media reports on the Rwandan genocide became available, policymakers in Paris began to discuss the possibility of a French-led 'humanitarian intervention'.[48] Senior officials from Mitterrand's inner circle at the Elysée Palace (the seat of the French presidency) and among the top military brass recommended the deployment of a French 'interposition force' to separate the warring parties.[49] Although these officials paid lip-service to humanitarian arguments, their real objective was to prevent an RPF victory and ultimately 'preserve the balance among the two Rwandan communities'.[50]

However, French decision-making authority over foreign affairs in this period was shared between the Socialist president, Mitterrand, and the conservative prime minister, Edouard Balladur, because of 'cohabitation' – which occurs when the president's party does not have a majority in parliament. (The Socialists had lost their parliamentary majority in 1993, resulting in the appointment of a conservative prime minister). Balladur, who had little interest in African affairs, opposed going beyond a strictly humanitarian intervention in Rwanda, and he was 'resolved to veto' an interposition force aimed at stopping the RPF.[51] Balladur insisted that any renewed French deployment would have to be limited to a few weeks, and he made his consent conditional on other countries participating and the availability of a UNSC mandate: 'There is no question of us going in by ourselves', the prime minister told President Mitterrand.[52]

Balladur prevailed on the question of multilateral involvement. Intense lobbying by French diplomats in New York yielded a UNSC mandate for a humanitarian intervention 'limited to a period of two months'.[53] France had previously sought the UN's blessing for various policies, including military intervention in the Balkans. However, this was the first time that Paris requested UNSC approval before intervening in its African sphere of influence – and it turned out to be an arduous task. 'Of all the resolutions that we

[48]Lanotte, *France au Rwanda*, 387–88.

[49]Led by Gen Christian Quesnot, Mitterrand's chief military adviser, these officials envisioned a French action that would 'progressively re-establish security' in Rwanda. See Quesnot, note for the president, 18 June 1994, at https://francegenocidetutsi.org/Quesnot18juin1994.pdf.

[50]Bruno Delaye, note for the president, 24 June 1994, at https://francegenocidetutsi.org/Delaye24juin1994.pdf. See also Lanotte, *France au Rwanda*, 395–97.

[51]Edouard Balladur, *Le pouvoir ne se partage pas: Conversations avec François Mitterrand* (Paris: Fayard 2009), 244–45.

[52]Edouard Balladur, defence council, 15 June 1994, at https://francegenocidetutsi.org/ConseilRestreint15juin1994.pdf. See also Balladur, *Le pouvoir ne se partage pas*, 245–46; and Lanotte, *France au Rwanda*, 399–401. Mitterrand himself appears to have thought that if necessary, France could intervene with only an ad hoc coalition of African partners: 'If we can't count on the others, we have to go in alone with the Africans', he declared during the same defence council meeting on 15 June.

[53]Res. 929, adopted on 22 June 1994, paragraphs 2, 4. France also secured (largely symbolic) troop contributions from several African countries, including Chad, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal. Gregory, 'French Military', 439; and Lanotte, *France au Rwanda*, 414.

proposed [in the early 1990s], this was the one that I found it most difficult to get adopted by the Council', explains Jean-Bernard Mérimée, France's representative to the UN in this period.[54]

France ultimately deployed about 1,200 troops to Rwanda in what became known as Operation Turquoise, establishing a 'safe humanitarian zone' in the southwestern part of the country. When French forces began deploying in late June 1994, the RPF's victory in the civil war appeared all but ineluctable. Kigali fell to the RPF on 4 July, and later that month major fighting stopped.[55] It is estimated that by deterring attacks on civilians during the final stages of the civil war, Operation Turquoise saved 10,000 to 15,000 lives; but the operation has also been criticised for allowing many *génocidaires* to escape abroad.[56]

Limited reforms in the late 1990s

During the late 1990s, members of France's foreign policy community pushed back against allegations of French complicity in the genocide. Balladur appears to have spoken for many of his former government colleagues, when he declared in 1998 that he found such accusations 'revolting'.[57] The main lesson that members of the foreign policy establishment in Paris took away from the Rwanda experience was that French interventions in situations of acute sectarian conflict involved 'risks of instrumentalisation' by African elites hostile to France (such as the RPF leadership), with potentially high costs for France's regional standing.[58] To the extent that the Rwanda experience changed France's Africa policy, the process was slow and uneven.

President Chirac, who succeeded Mitterrand at the Elysée Palace, was a traditionalist who 'leaned towards continuity in African affairs', explains Jean-David Levitte, Chirac's former diplomatic adviser.[59] The new president had little inclination to disrupt France's established approach of offering paternalistic protection to Francophone leaders in exchange for political and economic influence on the continent.

In 1995 and 1996, Chirac conducted several military interventions in Francophone Africa on the basis of bilateral defence agreements, without any multilateral approval or participation. First, in October 1995, he deployed about 600 French troops, backed by naval and aerial assets, to the Comoros

[54]Author interview with Jean-Bernard Mérimée (French perm-rep to the UNSC, 1991–95), Paris, 9 Dec. 2014.
[55]Lanotte, *France au Rwanda*, 437.
[56]Kroslak, *French Betrayal of Rwanda*, 232–40; and Prunier, *Rwanda Crisis*, 308–11.
[57]Edouard Balladur, statement before PICR, 21 Apr. 1998.
[58]Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces, French Senate, 'France's Africa Policy', Report no. 324, 28 Feb. 2011, 29, available at https://www.senat.fr/rap/r10-324/r10-3241.pdf.
[59]Author interview with Jean-David Levitte (chief diplomatic adviser to the French president, 1995–2000, and 2007–2012; French perm-rep to the UNSC, 2000–2002), Paris, 20 Mar. 2017. See also Richard Banégas and Roland Marchal, 'La politique africaine', in Maurice Vaïsse and Christian Lequesne (eds.), *La politique étrangère de Jacques Chirac* (Paris: Riveneuve 2013), 183–90; and Bat, *Syndrome Foccart*, 621–25.

Islands to end a coup attempt against the nation's president.[60] Then, in early 1996, Chirac deployed several parachute units to Cameroon to support the local government in a territorial dispute with Nigeria.[61] Later that same year, the French leader sent nearly 1,200 soldiers to the CAR to foil an attempted mutiny of local army units against the country's president and stabilise the fragile nation.[62]

Substantial change had to wait until 1997, when the French Socialist Party regained a parliamentary majority and Chirac was forced to share authority over foreign affairs in a cohabitation government with Lionel Jospin, the new prime minister. Jospin, who like his predecessor Balladur did not have a strong interest in African affairs, was determined to move France away from its traditional role as the *gendarme* of Africa. Already in the spring of 1997, Jospin insisted that French military operations in the CAR should be placed in a regional multilateral framework; and over the next year, he welcomed the deployment of an inter-African peace force that made it possible for French troops to gradually leave the country.[63]

As Louis Gautier, Jospin's senior defence adviser at the time, explains, the prime minister and his team believed that in the context of sectarian conflicts in fragile African states such as the CAR, Paris needed to 'move beyond purely bilateral relationships that had resulted in France being systematically called to the rescue – because this had essentially trapped France'.[64] Later in 1997, when an ethnic conflict escalated in Congo-Brazzaville, Jospin opposed a French military operation to buttress the country's leader, allowing him to be overthrown.[65] Then, in 1999, Jospin vetoed a French unilateral intervention in Côte d'Ivoire, which had been favoured by Chirac's senior Africa adviser, Michel Dupuch, aimed at restoring the ousted leader after a military coup.[66]

The goal of Jospin and his diplomatic advisers was to 'normalise our Africa policy and bring it into line with the rest of our foreign policy', explains Gilles Andréani, then the head of policy planning at the Foreign Ministry in Paris.[67] In this spirit, the prime minister announced a reduction of France's standing forces in Africa from 8,000 to 5,500, and he launched an ambitious multilateral initiative to strengthen and train African peacekeeping forces, known as RECAMP

[60]French Ministry of Defence, '50 Ans d'Opex en Afrique, 1964–2014', *Cahier du RETEX* (Paris: 2014), 32–33, available at www.c-dec.terre.defense.gouv.fr/images/documents/retex/cahier/20160606_50-ans-d-OPEX-Afrique.pdf.
[61]Ibid., 54–55.
[62]Ibid., 61–62.
[63]In 1998, a UN peacekeeping operation took over. See Raphaël Granvaud, *Que fait l'armée française en Afrique?* (Marseille: Agone 2009), 267–68.
[64]Author interview with Louis Gautier, Paris, 29 Mar. 2017.
[65]Yves Gounin, *La France en Afrique: Le combat des Anciens et des Modernes* (Brussels: de Boeck, 2009), 54; and Banégas and Marchal, 'La politique africaine', 191.
[66]Bat, *Syndrome Foccart*, 638–39.
[67]Author interview with Gilles Andréani, Paris, 26 Nov. 2014.

(*Renforcement des capacités africaines de maintien de la paix*). The RECAMP programme was meant to signal that France would no longer substitute its troops for local forces but instead aimed to empower the latter, while also promoting greater inter-African security cooperation.[68] However, even among France's Socialist leaders, not everyone shared Jospin's enthusiasm for multilateralism as a way of 'diluting France's responsibility'.[69] In particular, Hubert Védrine, France's foreign minister during the late 1990s and formerly a close confidant of Mitterrand, shared President Chirac's view that upholding France's bilateral security commitments was the key to the country's influence in Africa.[70]

The Côte d'Ivoire intervention, 2002–2004

In 2002, Chirac won a second presidential term and his Gaullist conservative party regained its parliamentary majority. Freed from the shackles of cohabitation, Chirac could again act on his interventionist impulses towards Francophone Africa.

The opportunity for Chirac to intervene militarily presented itself soon enough, when domestic turmoil engulfed Côte d'Ivoire, a former French colony tied to Paris by a bilateral defence agreement. Political tensions had been building up in Côte d'Ivoire for nearly a decade. After the country's longstanding president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, died in 1993, his successors resorted to sectarian politics to buttress their authority. They espoused the divisive doctrine of *ivoirité*, which stigmatised the country's northern (and primarily Muslim) inhabitants, who often had family ties in neighbouring Burkina Faso, as 'foreigners'. The *ivoirité* doctrine was pushed furthest by Laurent Gbagbo, a populist who was elected to the presidency in October 2000.[71] Discontent among Côte d'Ivoire's marginalised northern populations boiled over in September 2002, when disgruntled army officers from the north launched an armed insurrection. Troops loyal to President Gbagbo foiled an attempted coup in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire's political and administrative centre; but several northern cities fell to the rebellion, resulting in a de facto partition of the country.[72]

A short in-and-out mission?

On 20 September 2002, as rebel units were preparing for an all-out attack on Abidjan, the government of Côte d'Ivoire requested that French military forces

[68]Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces, French Senate, 'Crisis Management in Sub-Saharan Africa', Report no. 450, 14–15. See also Gregory, 'French Military', 441–42.
[69]Labertit, author interview.
[70]Labertit and Gautier, author interviews.
[71]Bat, *Syndrome Foccart*, 635–43.
[72]Ibid., 644–45.

based in the country under the bilateral defence agreement move out of their barracks and come to the government's assistance.[73] The next day, on 21 September, President Chirac held an emergency meeting in Paris with his chief military adviser, Gen Henri Bentégeat, and Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin. Fearing that a further destabilisation of Côte d'Ivoire would seriously harm France's interests in West Africa, they concluded that a military intervention to block the rebels' advance was needed.[74] Côte d'Ivoire was Francophone West Africa's economic powerhouse, and most trade to and from the Sahel region, including Mali and Burkina Faso, transited through its seaports.[75] There was also a possibility of large-scale civilian casualties – in particular, there were more than 20,000 French nationals living in Abidjan at the time whose lives would be at risk if the rebels entered the city. General Bentégeat recalls that the discussion during the 21 September meeting revolved around the fact that 'the rebels were well armed, and the Ivorian army would most likely be unable to stop them; so we had to intervene'.[76]

When Chirac and his advisers decided to intervene in Côte d'Ivoire, they were hopeful that the French military operation, code-named Licorne, could be terminated in a matter of weeks by handing off peacekeeping functions to an ECOWAS regional force.[77] The ECOWAS deployment, however, experienced several delays, not least because Nigeria, West Africa's most powerful state, was initially hesitant to support French policy.[78] Meanwhile, as political tensions in Côte d'Ivoire intensified during the autumn, several non-governmental organisations were describing a pre-genocidal situation with an acute risk of mass atrocities.[79] Under these circumstances, Chirac could hardly abandon tens of thousands of French nationals to their fate. Moreover, given the centrality of Côte d'Ivoire to France's regional sphere of influence, a withdrawal of French troops would have signalled that Paris was losing the willingness and perhaps the ability to influence political events there.[80] Consequently, Chirac and his team reluctantly accepted that the Licorne

[73] Jean-Jacques Konadje, *L'ONU et le conflit ivoirien* (Paris: Harmattan 2014), 78.

[74] Jacques Chirac, *Le temps présidentiel* (Paris: Nil 2011), 425; also Jean-Christophe Notin, *Le crocodile et le scorpion: La France et la Côte d'Ivoire, 1999–2013* (Monaco: Rocher 2013), 52–53.

[75] Stephen Smith, 'Les principales raisons du plus important engagement militaire français en Afrique depuis vingt ans', *Le Monde*, 4 Jan. 2003.

[76] Author interview with Gen Henri Bentégeat (chief of the military staff of the French president, Apr. 1999-Oct. 2002; chief of the French defence staff, Oct. 2002-Oct. 2006), Paris, 1 Mar. 2017.

[77] Notin, *Crocodile*, 63; and Smith, 'Principales raisons'.

[78] Nigerian authorities viewed the crisis as 'an African problem that must be solved by African leaders.' Quoted in US Embassy Abuja, 'Nigeria: Obasanjo Cool to Paris Summit on Côte d'Ivoire', cable no. 256597, 16 Dec. 2002. These hesitations, as well as logistical problems, meant that the 1,200-strong ECOWAS force only deployed in January 2003. Konadje, *L'ONU et le conflit ivoirien*, 136.

[79] Fabienne Hara and Comfort Ero, 'Ivory Coast on the Brink', *The Observer*, 15 Dec. 2002.

[80] A secret US diplomatic cable subsequently noted that 'the consequences for … French nationals of a withdrawal of French forces would be serious. The same is true for France's credibility throughout Africa. Such a decision will not be taken lightly'. US Embassy Paris, 'France and West Africa', cable no. 439, 25 Jan. 2005.

forces would have to remain deployed and police a 'green line' separating the parties for as long as necessary.[81]

French policymakers were wary of taking sides in a sectarian conflict marked by large-scale popular mobilisation; furthermore, Chirac had reservations about the Ivorian president's left-wing populism.[82] As a result, the Licorne forces took on a relatively neutral interposition role. Besides policing the green line, French troops limited themselves to offering some modest logistical support to Côte d'Ivoire's national army.[83] This balancing act, however, aroused the ire of both the rebels and President Gbagbo. The former accused Paris of preventing their military victory; meanwhile, Gbagbo complained that France was too lukewarm in its support for the rightful government and had de facto legitimised the rebellion.[84] Beginning in late October, Gbagbo orchestrated large-scale anti-French protests in Abidjan and elsewhere to underscore his discontent with French policy. The protesters, known as 'young patriots', accused France of occupying their country.[85] The fact that these young protesters could be so easily mobilised worried policymakers in Paris, as it revealed the existence of a powerful undercurrent of anti-French nationalism among West Africa's newer generations.[86]

UN cover against nationalist pushback

By the end of 2002, with no prospect of a quick exit for the Licorne forces, French policymakers concluded that a UNSC mandate would be highly desirable, because it would increase the military operation's legitimacy and deflect accusations of neocolonialism. Jean-Pierre Lacroix, a senior diplomat managing UN affairs at the Foreign Ministry in Paris at the time, recalls that 'initially, in September, we had acted in an emergency, and we felt that in this context our intervention was quite legitimate. But as we realised that there was no quick solution and the French intervention was becoming protracted, the absence of a UN mandate became more of a concern'.[87] Bruno Joubert, in that period the Foreign Ministry's director of African affairs, adds that he and his colleagues 'did not want to be accused of neocolonialism, and the French military in particular worried about having local populations turn against us. So it gradually became clear that we needed a Security Council

[81]Konadje, *L'ONU et le conflit ivoirien*, 83–86. See also Marco Wyss, '*Primus inter pares?* France and Multi-Actor Peacekeeping in Côte d'Ivoire', in Thierry Tardy and M. Wyss (eds.), *Peacekeeping in Africa: The Evolving Security Architecture* (London: Routledge 2014), 135.
[82]Notin, *Crocodile*, 39, 53; and Laurent D'Ersu, 'La crise ivoirienne, une intrigue franco-française', *Politique africaine* 105 (2007), 88.
[83]D'Ersu, 'Crise ivoirienne', 89; and Notin, *Crocodile*, 73.
[84]Bat, *Syndrome Foccart*, 645.
[85]Notin, *Crocodile*, 76–77.
[86]Gounin, *La France en Afrique*, 67.
[87]Author interview with Jean-Pierre Lacroix (deputy director [2002–06] and director [2014–17] of UN affairs, French Foreign Ministry), Paris, 27 Mar. 2017.

mandate'.[88] French policymakers also hoped that a UNSC mandate for Operation Licorne would be a first step towards securing the council's approval for a sizeable UN peacekeeping mission, which could be expected to further reduce the exposure of, as well as the burden on, French troops.[89]

In January 2003, French leaders launched a diplomatic offensive aimed at securing international backing. Foreign Minister de Villepin brought representatives of President Gbagbo and the main Ivorian rebel groups to Linas-Marcoussis, near Paris, for political negotiations that yielded an agreement in principle on a power-sharing 'government of national reconciliation'.[90] Soon thereafter, African leaders, including the chairperson of the AU and 14 out of 15 ECOWAS members (among them Nigeria), endorsed the Linas-Marcoussis agreement at a summit meeting in Paris. They also expressed the 'hope that the [UN] Security Council will affirm … the right of' French and ECOWAS forces in Côte d'Ivoire to 'take the necessary steps' for the protection of civilians.[91] This affirmation of strong regional support for France's role in Côte d'Ivoire prompted the UNSC to adopt Resolution 1464 on 4 February, which provided the French and ECOWAS forces with a robust civilian protection mandate.[92]

The deployment of UN peacekeepers took more time, largely because of US hesitations. These reflected concerns in Washington about cost-sharing in UN peacekeeping, as well as the fact that 'the Americans didn't feel like helping [France], because of our disagreements over the Iraq War', explains de La Sablière, France's UN representative in this period.[93] Yet de La Sablière, like several of his colleagues, had become convinced that for France to 'remain master of the game [in Côte d'Ivoire], the United Nations, with its uncontested legitimacy, had to become fully engaged'.[94] Without that, the French military presence risked increasingly becoming 'the target of [Gbagbo's] malicious propaganda'.[95] The Security Council finally authorised a 6,000-strong UN peacekeeping mission in February 2004, after repeated requests from

[88]Author interview with Bruno Joubert (director of African affairs, French Foreign Ministry, 2003–06; Africa adviser to the French president, 2007–09), Paris, 23 Mar. 2017. See also Chirac, *Le temps présidentiel*, 426; and Konadje, *L'ONU et le conflit ivoirien*, 88–89.

[89]Joubert, author interview. De Villepin first broached the idea of a UN mission with other UNSC partners in early 2003. Jean-Marie Guéhenno, *The Fog of Peace* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press 2015), 96.

[90]Bat, *Syndrome Foccart*, 648; and Notin, *Crocodile*, 94–97.

[91]UN, 'Conclusions of the Conference of Heads of State on Côte d'Ivoire' (Paris: 25–26 Jan. 2003), UN Doc. S/2003/99, available at www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Cote%20d'Ivoire%20Marcoussis.pdf.

[92]Jean-Marc de La Sablière, *Dans les coulisses du monde* (Paris: Robert Laffont 2013), 246–47; and Guéhenno, *Fog of Peace*, 99–100.

[93]De La Sablière, author interview. For more details on how tensions over Iraq affected UNSC diplomacy on Côte d'Ivoire, see Stefano Recchia, 'Overcoming Opposition at the UNSC: Regional Multilateralism as a Form of Collective Pressure', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, forthcoming.

[94]De La Sablière, *Coulisses du monde*, 246.

[95]Ibid., 247.

ECOWAS. As the UN forces deployed, France kept a reduced Licorne contingent on the ground in a supporting role, under national command.[96]

November 2004: The spectre of a complete loss of influence

Later in 2004, Chirac's momentary relapse to the old unilateralist modus operandi made it unmistakably clear that by acting in this way France risked losing all its influence in Côte d'Ivoire. President Gbagbo signed an agreement in the summer of 2004 that committed him to cede further authority to a prime minister drawn from the opposition, in exchange for the rebels' promise to disarm by 15 October of that year.[97] However, when the rebels failed to disarm by the October deadline, Gbagbo began planning a large-scale offensive against the rebel-held north of the country. Military operations began on 4 November, spearheaded by an aerial bombardment of rebel strongholds.[98]

On 6 November 2004, under circumstances that remain unclear, two Ivorian government aircraft hit the French military base at Bouaké, near the green line, killing a total of nine French soldiers and injuring nearly 40 others.[99] Although the pilots who hit the base may not have acted on direct orders from Gbagbo, authorities in Paris felt that the anti-French climate that the Ivorian leader had stirred up in previous months had made this attack possible.[100] President Chirac concluded that a swift and forceful retaliation against the bombardment of Bouaké would help re-establish local deterrence, and he thus ordered the immediate destruction of the entire Ivorian air force – four airplanes and six helicopters.[101] According to General Bentégeat, 'Chirac took the decision by himself, without convening a meeting with his advisers'.[102] Nor was there any effort on the part of French leaders to consult with partners at the UNSC before the retaliatory strikes.[103]

Back in Côte d'Ivoire, news of the French retaliatory strikes triggered massive anti-French protests by pro-Gbagbo young patriots who directed their rage against the Licorne forces and the French expatriate community.[104] During the early hours of 7 November, as a mob of tens of thousands was advancing

[96]Guéhenno, *Fog of* Peace, 99–100; and Notin, *Crocodile*, 111.
[97]Notin, *Crocodile*, 116; and Guéhenno, *Fog of Peace*, 104.
[98]D'Ersu, 'Crise ivoirienne'; 97–98; and Bat, *Syndrome Foccart*, 649.
[99]Bat, *Syndrome Foccart*, 650.
[100]Joubert, author interview. See also de La Sablière, *Coulisses du monde*, 250.
[101]Notin, *Crocodile*, 130; and Bat, *Syndrome Foccart*, 650.
[102]Bentégeat, author interview.
[103]Ambassador de La Sablière recalls that he simply 'explained' France's action after the fact, which, he recalls, resulted in 'some problems' with other members of the council (author interview). The UNSC nevertheless issued a declaration in support of the French forces, after Paris threatened to withdraw its entire contingent. De La Sablière, *Coulisses du monde*, 252.
[104]Bat, *Syndrome Foccart*, 650.

towards the Licorne force's main compound at Port-Bouët, on the outskirts of Abidjan, French military commanders decided that the protesters had to be stopped from crossing the bridges leading there – by force if necessary. Several dozen Ivorian civilians died in the ensuing confrontations, which also spread to other parts of Abidjan.[105] The spectacle of French attack helicopters opening fire on unarmed civilians coincided with a visit to Abidjan by South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, who had flown in to mediate on behalf of the AU. Some French officials believe that Gbagbo deliberately sought an escalation and 'organised this great protest march while Mbeki was in Côte d'Ivoire, to show that his was an occupied country'.[106] Be that as it may, the trigger-happy reaction of French forces undermined France's credibility as an impartial peace-keeper and harmed its standing both in Côte d'Ivoire and in the wider region.[107]

US State Department officials concluded in the aftermath of the November 2004 crisis that 'France's ability to influence events politically [in Côte d'Ivoire] has substantially declined [as a result of] the killing by French forces of Ivorian demonstrators in Abidjan … The French are now *obliged to work through the AU and the UNSC* to try to move the process' forward.[108] A report by the French Senate's committee on foreign affairs and defence similarly acknowledged that 'the French rather than international response' to the attack on Bouaké had 'weakened France's position in the eyes of its African partners'.[109] For much of 2005, French decision-makers kept a low profile on Côte d'Ivoire, leaving the political mediation effort to President Mbeki, who acted on behalf of the AU. Then, from 2006 onward, France reverted to a more active role – but it now systematically relied on the UNSC and regional multilateral bodies, especially ECOWAS (where it carried more weight than in the AU), in an effort to press Gbagbo into sharing power with the opposition.[110]

The November 2004 events finally drove home the importance of multi-lateral coordination and legitimation for major military escalations, lest France completely forfeit the ability to shape political events in West Africa. Presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire, requested by France and its partners and repeatedly delayed, finally took place in 2010. Gbagbo lost to his main opponent, Alassane Ouattara, but refused to concede defeat, producing a flare-up in violence that once again put civilian populations at risk.[111] As the humanitarian crisis intensified during the early months of 2011, French leaders secured a renewed UN mandate for military action as well as political

[105]Granvaud, *Armée française en Afrique*, 214–15.
[106]Author interviews; also Notin, *Crocodile*, 152.
[107]'Côte d'Ivoire and France: A Bloody Mess', *The Economist*, 11 Nov. 2004.
[108]US Embassy Paris, 'France and West Africa', cable no. 439, emph. added.
[109]Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces, French Senate, 'Crisis Management in Sub-Saharan Africa', Report no. 450, 45.
[110]De La Sablière, *Coulisses du monde*, 253–57; and Guéhenno, *Fog of Peace*, 107–12.
[111]Notin, *Crocodile*, 235–54; and Bat, *Syndrome Foccart*, 655–58.

backing from ECOWAS and the AU. In April of that year, French Licorne forces, acting in close coordination with UN peacekeepers, launched a military offensive that ended in Gbagbo's forcible ouster and arrest, allowing Ouattara to take power.[112] As the chief of the French defence staff at the time recalls, President Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-12) appeared to have assimilated the lesson that 'multilateral legitimacy would be the best way to persuade those, especially in Africa, who suspected France of having neocolonial tendencies that they were wrong; Sarkozy understood that this would help preserve [France's] regional influence'.[113]

Conclusion

This article has argued that policymakers in Paris have gradually come to recognise the value of support from global and regional multilateral bodies for France's military interventions in Africa, primarily to counter nationalist pushback and related accusations of neocolonialism from African audiences. The 2002–04 Côte d'Ivoire experience marked the culmination of France's turn to multilateralism. De La Sablière, who served in high-level French policy roles dealing with African and UN affairs for nearly three decades from the 1980s onwards, sums it up as follows: 'There wasn't a big moment when someone took a grand strategic decision to multilateralise our interventions in Africa. Things initially happened on a case-by-case basis. First, we needed the UN to legitimise Operation Turquoise in Rwanda; then, we needed the UN in Côte d'Ivoire. It was not until after the 2004 crisis in Côte d'Ivoire that multilateralism became the default choice'.[114]

France's military actions in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002 and 2004 were the last instances in which Paris proceeded in a blatantly unilateral fashion, without any prior international coordination or support. Ever since, before deploying sizeable troop contingents to Africa or changing the mission for existing deployments, French leaders have carefully coordinated their actions with regional partners and sought the support of multilateral bodies.

In 2003 and again in 2006, France led stabilisation missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, after obtaining UNSC approval as well as endorsements and concrete pledges of support from the European Union (EU). In 2008, France intervened in Chad to stop cross-border rebel movements, again with UNSC approval and EU participation.[115] Then, as noted above, France launched a new intervention in Côte d'Ivoire in 2011, with

[112]Wyss, '*Primus inter pares?*', 138–41; and, for details of the military operation, Notin, *Crocodile*, 368–92.
[113]Author interview with Adm Edouard Guillaud (chief of the military staff of the French president, 2006–10; chief of the French defence staff, 2010–14), Paris, 24 Mar. 2017.
[114]Author interview.
[115]On the DRC intervention, see Recchia, 'Overcoming Opposition at the UNSC'. On Chad, see Marina Henke, 'A Tale of Three French Interventions', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, this issue.

support from the UNSC and regional organisations. Finally, President François Hollande (2012-17) intervened in Mali and the CAR in 2013, after months of coordination with African partners, and he secured endorsements and active support from various multilateral bodies. According to Thomas Mélonio, Hollande's adviser for African affairs, the president and his team believed that 'France can express its power more effectively and have its regional status recognised by forging and leading multinational coalitions – acting as the pivotal state with endorsements from global and regional organisations'.[116]

In recent years, French policymakers have embraced the narrative of military interventions in Africa as part of a 'global war on terror'.[117] This has to some extent (re)legitimised France's military interventions, including in the eyes of African leaders.[118] Since 2014, France has occasionally launched limited counter-terrorist airstrikes and commando raids in West Africa, at the request of local governments, without explicit multilateral sanction – such as when President Emmanuel Macron ordered the aerial bombing of rebel columns advancing on Chad's capital, N'Djamena, in early 2019.[119] In spite of this more permissive environment, however, policymakers in Pairs have been careful to seek overarching multilateral legitimacy for their longer-term military commitments from regional bodies (such as the G5 Sahel organisation), as well as from the UNSC, which endorsed French military action against terrorists in the Sahel in 2015 and again in 2017.[120]

The view that multilateral approval is highly desirable for France's military interventions in Africa is reflected in the country's most recent white paper on national security and defence. This document notes that 'external intervention must not be suspected of being a new instrument for the abusive projection of power …. [Therefore] the UN, as well as other regional and subregional organisations, will be called upon to play an increasing role in the legitimisation and strategic conduct of external operations'.[121] To conclude, it appears that as a result of difficult experiences in the decade from 1994 to 2004, norms of multilateral intervention have become institutionalised in French policymaking, to the level of 'second-degree internalisation'.[122] What this means in practice is that French policymakers now generally comply with these norms, but not

[116]Author interview with Thomas Mélonio (deputy presidential adviser [2012–16] and presidential adviser [2016–17] on African affairs), Paris, 22 Mar. 2017.
[117]Powell, 'Battling Instability?'; and Pannier and Schmitt, 'To fight another day'.
[118]As Louis Gautier, the third-highest-ranking official at the French Defence Ministry from 2014 to 2018, explains, 'The terrorist challenge has restored the legitimacy of France's African action – nobody criticizes France anymore' (author interview).
[119]Adam Nossiter, 'Can France Ever Leave Africa? Airstrikes in Chad Raise an Old Question', *New York Times*, 14 Feb. 2019.
[120]See fn. 2, above; and Table 1.
[121]French Ministry of Defence, *White Paper on Defence and National Security* (Paris: 2013), 24, available at http://www.livreblancdefenseetsecurite.gouv.fr/pdf/the_white_paper_defence_2013.pdf.
[122]Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (NY: Cambridge UP 1999), 287–88.

because they are being pushed and coerced (first-degree internalisation), or because they fully identify with these norms and accept them as binding (third-degree internalisation); instead, they comply 'because they think it will advance some exogenously given interest'.[123] This interest consists in France's ability to continue to shape political events as first among equals in its African sphere of influence.

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Notes on contributor

Stefano Recchia (PhD, Columbia University) holds the John G. Tower distinguished chair in international politics as an associate professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX. His research interests revolve around the politics and ethics of military intervention, US and French defence policy, and multilateral cooperation in security affairs. He is the author of *Reassuring the Reluctant Warriors: US Civil-Military Relations and Multilateral Intervention*, published in 2015 in the Cornell Studies in Security Affairs series. Further information about his research is available at www.stefanorecchia.net.

ORCID

Stefano Recchia http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5470-6311

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[123]Ibid.

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