

Operation Serval: Counterterrorism or Neocolonial Patterns of Dependency?

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Abstract

After 1945, the weakening of the French empire in Africa led to the rise of independence movements. However, France maintained its political, economic, and military influence in the continent, especially within its former colonies in the Sahel region: Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger. In the case of Mali, France conducted direct military interventions to fight Jihadist terrorist groups dominating the region, starting with Operation Serval in 2013. Although the West usually portrays France as an advocate for international security, this paper re-examines Operation Serval under post-colonial lenses. The premise of counterterrorism does not sufficiently legitimize Operation Serval, especially when considering the colonial tie between the nations and non-Western notions of sovereignty. Besides fighting terrorism, France had national interests within its military intervention in Mali, reinforcing the maintenance of neocolonialist patterns of dependency between the countries.

Keywords: Operation Serval, Mali, France, neo-colonialism, post-colonial theory, legitimacy, military intervention.

I. Introduction

After a decade of direct military intervention in Mali, France finally withdrew its troops at the start of 2023,¹ marking the weakening of French influence in the Sahel region of Africa.

Mali achieved independence from its former colonizer, France, in 1960. Nonetheless, just like most African colonies, their independence did not guarantee their sovereignty. Ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world – with a position of 184 out of 189 countries

globally² – Mali suffers from the harsh legacy of the colonial period and complex ethnic-political regional conflicts that establish a long-term trend of political, social, and economic instability.

In the XXI century, a weak African state is a prominent ground for the rise of Jihadist terrorist groups. During 2012, the Salafist terrorist organizations al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) took control of northern Mali, which led to the Malian crisis.³

¹ KING, Isabelle. **How France Failed Mali: the End of Operation Barkhane**. Harvard International Review: 2023.

² ISS African Futures, 2023.

³ SILVA, Josias Marcos de Resende Silva et alii. **A intervenção francesa no Mali: estudo de caso sobre a Operação Serval**. Revista de

The Malian crisis quickly raised international concerns from Western states, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the European Union, and the United Nations, that recognized the need for external military intervention. At the start of 2013, direct intervention took place with the French Operation Serval. Over the course of one and a half years, French forces fought to stop the Jihadist advance in Mali under the pretense of fighting terrorism and recovering Mali's territorial integrity.

Although France succeeded in stopping the advance of Jihadist insurgents in the short-term, justifying the intervention only within the terms of counterterrorism oversimplifies a highly complex African conflict. The historical colonial tie between the countries creates the need for critical studies of Operation Serval that go beyond the security rationale and dive into the potential neocolonial intentions of France's decision to interfere.

The definition of sovereignty is imperative to the discussion at hand. Sovereignty can be understood as the ability of a state to act independently of other states in both domestic and foreign affairs, as well as their ability to exercise control over their territory and resources within their internationally recognized borders. For African countries, the exercising and understanding of sovereignty can be more complex; despite having gained independence from Western nations, they are still in the grip of Western capitalism. Instead of coercive colonial regiment, Western

states reinforce neo-colonial ties through underlying mechanisms like international aid and banking systems,⁴ thus creating barriers for actual African sovereignty.

Considering the impact of Serval on Mali's sovereignty, the following analysis will address the legitimate and legal grounds that support Operation Serval. To emphasize the difference between the terms, legality refers to what is compliant with a legal framework, while legitimacy is more subjective, alluding to the ethics or morality behind the situation. In the legal realm, the military intervention is sufficiently supported by valid consent and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. While the legitimization of Serval is insufficient when reduced only to counterterrorism, due to the fact that France also had economic and internal motives within the operation.

By incorporating a post-colonial theory on European military intervention that drifts away from intrinsically Western notions of history and politics, this paper determines that, although Operation Serval was imperative to contain the Malian crisis, it also displayed patterns of neocolonialism.

II. Post-colonialist Theory of Intervention and the Essence of Neocolonialism

In order to properly analyze the French influence in Mali, African perspectives should be incorporated into the debate and the definition of neocolonialism must be addressed.

Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad: 2022, vol 17(2), pp. 155-172.

⁴ YOUNG, Robert. **Neocolonial Times, Neocolonialism**. Oxford Literary Review, Vol 13.

Kwame Nkrumah, in *Neo-Colonialism: the Last Stage of Imperialism*, discusses how “the essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.”⁵ This quote summarizes Mali’s relationship with France. Although the country is independent, the political and economic ties with its former colony secures its lower hierarchical position in the international community. It reduces Mali’s decision-making capacities about policies carried out in its own territory and violates its practical sovereignty.

In the book *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa*, Catherine Gegout uses realist, constructivist, and postcolonialist theories to analyze and understand how European military interventions in Africa can express neocolonialism.

A realist approach toward military intervention suggests that European countries intervene in African states on the grounds of security and prestige.⁶ Gegout explains security in the means of protecting citizens and territory, while prestige is the attempt of one State to impress others with the power it has, or the power it wants others to believe it possesses.⁷

Within the framework of realism, security is the main motive for intervention. In the Malian case, security as fighting terrorism was the chosen justification for Operation Serval. However, although this could be sufficient reasoning for deciding to intervene, realist interests also include economic and prestige factors. European countries continue to attempt to safeguard their economic interests when intervening externally.⁸ In more contemporary cases, they do not necessarily act upon expanding those economic objectives, which would be a direct imperialist approach. Instead, economic matters serve as qualifiers for the decision to intervene: not the sole purpose, but a well considered condition for military intervention. France’s motives in Mali are not an exception to that rule.

Conversely, by bringing a post-colonial theory to the debate, Western notions of security are reconsidered, and military intervention is seen through neo-colonialist lenses; European decisions to implement military intervention in post-colonial states are influenced by underlying ideas of superiority over African nations. Again, contemporary interventions are not necessarily part of an imperialist agenda, but they are certainly related to the political, social, and cultural effects of the colonial past. Former colonizers often foster patronizing interventions that, veiled by security pretexts, subtly perpetuate neo-colonialist intentions.⁹

⁵NKRUMAH, Kwame. **Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism.**

⁶GEGOUT, Catherine. **Why Europe Intervenes in Africa: Security, Prestige, and the Legacy of Colonialism.** Oxford University Press, 2016.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Lastly, to highlight an important distinction, post-colonialism encompasses the studies of colonial legacy and the period of decolonization, while neocolonialism refers to the actual use of the economic and socio-political power by Western nations to maintain their global hegemony. This paper will apply the post-colonial theory on military interventions when analyzing Operation Serval.

III. Historical Background and the MNLA

Diving into a non-Western perspective, the studies of the Malian conflict must consider its various axes. It is necessary to recognize the impact of the ethnic-political regional tensions on the rise of terrorism in the country before properly analyzing the reasoning behind Operation Serval.

The Malian conflict does not start with the Jihadist occupation of the North; it formally starts on January 17, 2012, with the rebellion of a northern Malian separatist group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), against the central government located in the southern city of Bamako. The northern Malian population is composed of the Tuaregs, a nomadic Berber people who call their homeland Azawad and live in the Sahel and Sahara regions of, mainly Mali, but also Niger, Algeria, Burkina Faso, and Libya.¹⁰ Historically, the Tuaregs have been excluded politically and economically in Malian policies, which has resulted in deep grievances towards the southern government of Bamako.

¹⁰FRANCIS, David J. **The regional impact of the armed conflict and French intervention in Mali**. NOREF, report: 2013.

This sociopolitical exclusion can be attributed to the colonial period; the French colonial government was more present in the Sahel area (southern Mali) that was more environmentally hospitable than the Sahara area (northern Mali). Therefore, they supported the Tuaregs' willingness of autonomy in order to prevent rebellions against the colony in a difficult to manage region.¹¹ For example, between 1957 and 1962, France promoted the administrative unity of the south of Algeria, Mauritania, and the northern parts of Mali, Niger, and Chad through the creation of a Common Organization of the Saharan Regions (OCRS).¹² The project sought to maintain French dominance in the area but also suited the separatist Tuaregs' will.

Besides social-ethnic dimensions, the consolidation of the MNLA can also be traced back to Western military hands on the African continent. With the end of the Libyan Civil War in 2011, numerous Malian Tuaregs that served in Libyan military units returned to the country, bringing along their sophisticated weaponry and well-trained fighters.¹³ Employing these resources, the Tuaregs strengthened their militant organization and pursued their fight for autonomy. The Malian crisis in 2012 is one of the unintended consequences of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) intervention in Libya, that militarily supported rebel groups to orchestrate the fall of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² BERGAMASCHI, Isaline. DIAWARA, Mahamadou. **The French military intervention in Mali: not exactly Françafrique but definitely postcolonial**. Peace Operations in the Francophone World, Routledge, 2014: pp 137-152.

¹³ BOEKE, Sergei. TISSERON, Antonin. **Mali's Long Road Ahead**. The RUSI Journal, 2014: 159:5, pp 32-40.

Muammar Qadhafi, Libyan ruler from 1969 to 2011. Additionally, France was one of the European countries that actively participated in the NATO-led military campaign in Libya with Operation Harmattan. This matter illustrates how African issues are deeply connected with the political, cultural, economic, and military Western penetration in the continent.

In a post-colonial context, the discrepancy between northern and southern Mali was never effectively addressed. The Tuaregs' increased military power and their willingness to act upon their historical grievances made them vulnerable to the influence of the rebellious Jihadist groups of AQIM and MUJAO who saw the region as an opportunity to establish a new regime based on the Sharia – religious laws based on scriptures of Islam – as well as an economically valuable area for drugs and human trafficking.¹⁴

By April 2012, the MNLA had conquered major cities in the north and claimed the independence of Azawad.¹⁵ In the south, the Malian Army, seeped in corruption and nepotism, was unable to respond as the rebels advanced. Putting an end to two decades of continuous democratic governance, the military's frustration with the inability of the government to contain the conflict led to a coup d'état

by Captain Amadou Sanoho against the former president, Dioncounda Traoré.¹⁶

Under increasing instability, the radical Islamist groups hijacked the MNLA rebellion and exploited the situation for their own ends: from June 2012 onwards, AQIM and MUJAO controlled northern Mali and started to advance.¹⁷



Figure 1: Mali's Rebel Territory, January 2013¹⁸

When the Jihadist advance was close to the capital, Bamako, Mali requested military aid from France, which responded with the launch of Operation Serval on January 11, 2013.

¹⁴ BATOU, Jean. **Mali: a neo-colonial operation disguised as an anti-terrorist intervention.** New Politics Vol. XIV No. 3, 55: 14 oct, 2018.

¹⁵ JESSE, Genevieve. **The French Intervention in the 2012 Malian Conflict: Neocolonialism Disguised as Counterterrorism.** SUURJ, 2019: Seattle University Undergraduate Research Journal: Vol. 3, Article 15.

¹⁶ BATOU, Jean. Op. cit.

¹⁷ BOEKE, Sergei. BART, Schuurman. **Operation 'Serval': A Strategic Analysis of the French Intervention in Mali, 2013-2014.** Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism, Leiden University, The Netherlands: The Journal of Strategic Studies, 24 Jul 2015.

¹⁸ ORIONIST, **A map showing the fullest extent of rebel-held territory (January 2013), before it was re-taken by Malian and French forces, 2014.**

IV. The Legal Realm of Operation Serval: UNSC 2085 Resolution and ‘Intervention by Invitation’

Mali’s interim president, Dioncounda Traoré, appealed to France for military aid after the Jihadist groups reached the central town of Konna. On 10 January, 2013, France’s UN Ambassador, Gerard Araud, confirmed that Traoré wrote a letter to President François Hollande of France requesting military assistance to combat rebel forces.¹⁹ A day later, on January 11, France sends an official letter to the UN Security Council stating that:

“France has responded today to a request for assistance from the Interim President of the Republic of Mali, Mr. Dioncounda Traoré. Mali is facing terrorist elements from the north, which are currently threatening the territorial integrity and very existence of the State and the security of its population . . . [T]he French armed forces, in response to that request and in coordination with our partners, particularly those in the region, are supporting Malian units in combating those terrorist elements. The operation, which is in conformity with international law, will last as long as necessary.”²⁰

The Malian request for aid is extremely important for establishing a consensus about the legality of Operation

Serval. The UNSC and the international community acknowledged the validity of the French argument both due to the urgency of acting upon the situation and through Mali’s consent for the intervention. However, under the study of international law, the scholars Karine Bannelier and Theodore Christakis point out important considerations in the UNSC authorization and the ‘intervention by invitation’ factor of Serval to determine the legitimacy of the intervention.

Addressing the escalation of the Malian conflict and the advance of the Jihadist groups, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2085 to authorize the use of force by an African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) on 20 December, 2012.²¹ The Resolution made clear that only AFISMA was authorized to use force in Mali. However, since no UN-approved military deployment was expected prior to September 2013, the Jihadist groups had time to organize their positions and capture Konna.

Following the capture of Konna, the UNSC published a press statement calling for “Member States to assist the settlement of the crisis in Mali,”²² recognizing the urgency for intervention. This press statement is fundamental for providing the legal basis of the intervention: besides the Malian direct request, the UNSC also gives France its ‘blessing’ to interfere.²³

¹⁹ Deutsche Welle News. **Mali seeks military support**. 2013.

²⁰ Bannelier, K. & Christakis, T. (2013). **Under the UN Security Council’s watchful eyes: Military intervention by invitation in the Malian conflict**. *Leiden Journal of International Law* 26(4), 855-74.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

Scholars establish that intervention by invitation is legal when valid consent has been given by a legitimate government. In the Malian case, concerns on that matter may arise due to the country's uncertain and unstable political context. President Traoré was an interim president, not democratically elected after the military coup, which could interfere in the validity of his request. However, Traoré was the only government representative internationally and internally recognized, which reinforces the legality of the intervention.²⁴

Given the evaluation of Bannelier and Christakis, in the legal realm, Operation Serval is legitimately backed by international law and the international community.

V. The Legitimacy of Operation Serval Under the Framework of a Post-colonial Theory

Going beyond the legal grounds of Serval and returning to the theoretical study of military interventions, the French motives to intervene must also be revised to determine the legitimacy of the operation. While the legal framework is certain, the *jus ad bellum*,²⁵ or the legitimacy, of the intervention is proved insufficient when using a post-colonial approach on the analysis.

The day after the start of Operation Serval, President Hollande declared that France “has no other goal than the fight against terrorism” to justify his decision to

intervene.²⁶ However, although security motives are usually the main motive for European military intervention, prestige and economic interests also play a significant role in the decision-making process.

Referring to the realist theory on military intervention, France's main motive was indeed a security concern on the rise of terrorism. In an international security context, it is believed that capable states should react when fragile states are at risk of falling to terrorist groups and violent extremism.²⁷ Moreover, the French efforts on fighting terrorism were supported by Malian officials and citizens. Initially, the Malian military junta that conducted the 2012 coup d'état rejected the idea of external intervention based on pro-sovereignty arguments, conducting actions like preventing an ECOWAS plane from landing at Bamako to avoid any external influence.²⁸ However, the incapacity of the Malian army to defend the country from the Jihadist attacks proved the French intervention not only necessary, but inevitable.

Under an interesting paradox, Malian citizens and legal representatives were willing to tolerate a temporary break of national sovereignty by accepting French intervention in order to recover their sovereignty and territorial integrity from the Jihadist terrorist groups. In the words of the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *Jus ad bellum*: the legitimate reasons a state may engage in war (Oxford definition).

²⁶ Le Monde Afrique. **Hollande: the operation in Mali “has no other aim than the fight against terrorism”**. 2013.

²⁷ Stigall, D. E.(2015). **The French military intervention in Mali, counter-terrorism, and the law of armed conflict**. *Military Law Review*, 223(1).

²⁸ BERGAMASCHI, Isaline. DIAWARA, Mahamadou. **The French military intervention in Mali: not exactly Françafrique but definitely postcolonial**. *Peace Operations in the Francophone World*, Routledge, 2014: pp 137-152.

political scientist, Samir Amin, it is in the name of the “lesser evil” presumed to be the French domination in comparison to the Jihadist threat that Operation Serval can be justified.²⁹

In interviews conducted in 2013 by Mahamadou Diawara, Malian citizens stated that France had the moral and political obligation to accept Traoré’s request for intervention. As an example, a Malian mason declared that “France must help us because France colonized us. France must help us because we are not an Anglophone country, we are a Francophone country.”³⁰

So, could the fight against terror provide enough legitimate grounds to the operation? The reality is, even if counterterrorism justifies Operation Serval as it was the only resource that could stop the Jihadist advance in Mali, the colonial tie between the countries provides obstacles in portraying France as a legitimate hero that saved Mali from the loss of its sovereignty. The mason was right by saying that France should help Mali because of their colonial tie. However, France did not intervene due to moral or ethical concerns within an historical debt, but because other French interests were at stake.

To reference Gegout’s work again:

“In the perspective of neo-colonialism, hypotheses regarding intervention are the following: 1) if an actor has no colonial past in an

African state, (...) it is unlikely to intervene in this state; and 2) if a state has a colonial past in an African state and acts as a neo-colonial power, it is likely to intervene militarily in this state if it is in the security and economic interest of the neo-colonial state, and if it provides the neo-colonial state with prestige.”³¹

The intervention in Mali was an opportunity for France to enhance its international status and obtain prestige from other nations. Since France’s global economic influence has significantly declined in modern times, promoting stability in African countries – especially former colonies – is an important strategy to secure the French seat at the UNSC. The prestige from intervention is even greater when it encompasses counterterrorism, a pivotal topic in international security since the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

Besides fighting terrorism, France also wanted to maintain its economic and political influence in the Sahel to prevent other competitors like China from gaining power in the region. The French nuclear energy company, *Areva*, monopolizes the exploitation of uranium at Arlit, Niger, the world’s fourth-largest uranium exporter, which borders Mali.³² One third of all fuel consumed by the French nuclear plants comes from this region, which makes their presence in Mali economically relevant. The significance of

²⁹ AMIN, Samir. *L’Afrique de l’Ouest bloquée*. Paris, Minuit, 1973.

³⁰ BERGAMASCHI, Isaline. DIAWARA, Mahamadou. **The French military intervention in Mali: not exactly Françafrique but definitely postcolonial**. *Peace Operations in the Francophone World*, Routledge, 2014: pp 137-152.

³¹ GEGOUT, Catherine. **Why Europe Intervenes in Africa: Security, Prestige, and the Legacy of Colonialism**. Oxford University Press, 2016.

³² BATOU, Jean. **Mali: a neo-colonial operation disguised as an anti-terrorist intervention**. *New Politics* Vol. XIV No. 3, 55: 14 oct, 2018.

these mines is evident as they are protected by French commandos from a secret location.³³ In fact, France's privileged position in the Sahel is supported by data suggesting they have a trade surplus on the order of 300 million Euros with Mali, which is five times greater than its foreign aid to the country.³⁴

Consequently, Operation Serval also served France's interests. A French military base installed in northern Mali granted easy access to the uranium deposits of Arlit, giving France an advantage against Chinese competitors.

By the end of March 2013, the Jihadist advance was contained by French troops and the central government of Bamako regained its territorial control. In July 2013, France reinforced the need for presidential elections to ensure the power and leadership in Bamako. Bringing evidence for the maintenance of political ties between the countries, the new democratically elected President Ibrahim Boubakar Keita was a close friend of French President Hollande having participated together in the French socialist party in 1999.³⁵ These personal connections between the leaders illustrate how France's actions in Mali are a mechanism of assuring its informal

empire of political, economic, cultural, and military structures on its former colonies.

Therefore, in a post-colonial approach to the conflict, it is evident how Operation Serval is rooted in neocolonial patterns. While France secured its short-term interests, as a Jihadist-dominated Mali would not be favorable for French regional economic assets, broader-goals of stability were not addressed.

Under the counterterrorist label, France's unrestrained military power ignored the complexity of the Malian crisis. Operation Serval created obstacles for the resolution of the Tuaregs' rebellion against the central government by preventing regional powers from takeoff the primary role in the conflict.³⁶ Focusing all efforts against the Jihadist groups, the conflict between northern and southern Mali was put aside despite it being the main factor of instability.

Revisiting sovereignty matters, it is necessary to take a two-way approach to analyze the impact of the intervention in Mali's sovereignty. From one perspective, France restored Mali's sovereignty when its troops recovered the fraction of territory lost to rebels and re-established the central government in Bamako. However, as defined in the introduction, sovereignty is not only about having control over one's territory, but also about the ability of a nation to govern itself without the interference from external powers. It is evident that Mali's

³³ BOEKE, Sergei. BART, Schuurman. **Operation 'Serval': A Strategic Analysis of the French Intervention in Mali, 2013-2014.** Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism, Leiden University, The Netherlands: The Journal of Strategic Studies, 2015.

³⁴ BATOU, Jean. **Mali: a neo-colonial operation disguised as an anti-terrorist intervention.** *New Politics* Vol. XIV No. 3, 55: 14 oct, 2018.

³⁵ BERGAMASCHI, Isaline. DIAWARA, Mahamadou. **The French military intervention in Mali: not exactly Françafrique but definitely postcolonial.** *Peace Operations in the Francophone World*, Routledge, 2014: pp 137-152.

³⁶ JESSE, Genevieve. **The French Intervention in the 2012 Malian Conflict: Neocolonialism Disguised as Counterterrorism.** *SUURJ*, 2019: Seattle University Undergraduate Research Journal: Vol. 3, Article 15.

economic structures and political policies are heavily influenced by French interests; France should not be praised as a liberator. Especially for postcolonial African countries, sovereignty should not be reduced to territorial integrity. In order to achieve factual sovereignty, African nations should be able to resolve their own conflicts without European interference. But, since their struggles are rooted in a colonial past, it is excessively challenging for countries like Mali to address any structural matter without relying on Western nations. Mali temporarily freed itself from the Jihadist clutches but has never escaped its larger, invisible prison: the French sphere of influence. In the words of former president Dioncounda Traoré, “they (France) have simply stolen our country from us. I am Malian and I say forcefully and loudly that they have stolen Mali, under the pretext of protecting it from jihadists.”³⁷

Mali’s admission to the UN in 1960 reinforces the idea that France’s military actions in the country are part of a multilateral ‘collaboration’ between nations.³⁸ However, this narrative that the old colonial power was undeniably welcomed as a liberator fails to account for the historical discrepancy between the countries that were associated by a hierarchical relation of domination. Qualifying the relation of a former colonizer with its former colony as a ‘collaboration’ is a Western tactic to camouflage the remaining exploitation of African countries.

³⁷TRAORÉ, A. D. & DIOP, B. B. *La gloire des imposteurs lettres sur la Mali et l’Afrique*. Paris: P. Rey, 2013. p 127.

³⁸ JESSE, Genevieve. **The French Intervention in the 2012 Malian Conflict: Neocolonialism Disguised as Counterterrorism**. SUURJ, 2019: Seattle University Undergraduate Research Journal: Vol. 3, Article 15.

Even if Operation Serval achieved its military objectives, it failed politically: the structural causes of the conflict remained stronger than ever.³⁹ Mali continued to drown in corruption, extremist groups re-emerged, and the north and south were more divided than ever. The crisis demonstrated how Mali still lacks capacity to respond to issues caused by centuries of colonial exploitation and forcefully set artificial borders. They still deeply rely on its old colonial power politically, economically and militarily, which challenges their sovereignty as an independent country.

VI. Conclusion

Operation Serval is legitimate according to international law and, more importantly, justified under the pretext of counterterrorism; due to the Malian incapacity to respond to the Jihadist attacks, relying on France was imperative for the recovery of the country’s territorial integrity and the prevention of terrorism within its borders.

However, considering the post-colonial theory in European military intervention, Serval has illegitimate motives. By diving into the ethics and morals behind the intervention and addressing the colonial heritage of Mali, it is evident how France had underlying economic and prestige interests besides the security matters regarding counterterrorism. Hence, although this paper does not dismiss how Serval was indeed important for the

³⁹ SILVA, Josias Marcos de Resende Silva et alii. **A intervenção francesa no Mali: estudo de caso sobre a Operação Serval**. Revista de Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad: 2022, vol 17(2), pp. 155-172.

short-term resolution of the Malian crisis, France should not be seen as a hero that saved Mali. France does not do charity; with Operation Serval, the European country fought terrorism with one hand, while holding tight to its interests in Mali with the other.

From the structural causes of the conflict to the attempts to solve it, France is the key player in the Malian dynamics. The Tuareg's historical grievances, the militarization of the MNLA, and the fragility of Mali's government can all be traced back to the colonial past of the country. Fighting terrorism or not, a direct action of a former colonizer within its former colony reinforces neocolonial patterns of dependency.

Claiming that Mali regained its sovereignty with the stop of the Jihadist expansion is incongruous with African reality. Since the fight against terrorism is rooted in Western interests, this concept cannot be directly exported to the African narrative. Assuming that sovereignty is directly tied to counterterrorism in every country oversimplifies what it is to be independent as a non-Western nation. Considering that countries subject to neocolonialism are, in theory, independent and sovereign, the discussion of sovereignty in former colonies must acknowledge that and, therefore, should not rely only on counterterrorism. Mali's recovery of territorial integrity came with a loss of sovereignty in other matters, like policy direction and military decision-making, that were dictated by France during the intervention. As Nkrumah describes

it, "a State in the grip of neo-colonialism is not master of its own destiny."⁴⁰

For this reason, the legitimacy of Operation Serval is insufficient if supported only by Western notions of international security. By analyzing the motives within the operation and acknowledging the historical framework of the crisis, Operation Serval can be characterized as a French neocolonial instrument of exerting control in the Sahel region.

⁴⁰ NKURUMAH, Kwame. **Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism.**

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