

Accompanying Partners during Military Operations

Early Expectations for Task Force Takuba

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A coalition of European special operations forces (SOF) called “Task Force Takuba” (henceforth Takuba) will soon begin supporting the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) as a part of the French counterterrorism force Operation Barkhane. Despite numerous capacity building efforts by external actors, Mali still lacks armed forces capable of autonomously pushing back the advance of designated armed terrorist groups. Takuba adds a component to the Mali mission mosaic that is focused on building FAMA’s capacity by accompanying FAMA forces during military operations. Drawing on experiences from Afghanistan, particularly the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLT), this memo discusses some preliminary expectations for Takuba in terms of effectiveness, partnership, and security policy.

On November 5, 2019, French Minister of Defence Florence Parly announced that a coalition of European SOF would be formed to transmit their exceptional know-how to Mali’s army. Takuba is presented as a triple-A mission – deployed to Advise, Assist, and Accompany – with emphasis on the final A. Indeed, in a declaration on January 21, 2020, Parly specified that Takuba will be in Mali in order to accompany FAMA in combat.

As a SOF component under the command of French-led Operation Barkhane, Takuba is set to support FAMA during operations in the Liptako-Gourma region, an area covering parts of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.¹ Here, trans-border terrorism, including from Al Qaeda- and Daesh-associated groups, has rapidly gained ground and is posing a sustained challenge to FAMA and G5 Sahel forces. Supporting the G5 Sahel partner nations (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger) has been part of Barkhane’s aim from the beginning and their joint operations are increasingly taking place in Liptako-Gourma. By bringing in a SOF element dedicated to the capacity building task, the idea is not only to improve FAMA’s capacity, but also to unburden Barkhane.

In the domain of external military interventions, unintended consequences frequently arise. Learning from past experiences can help to mitigate some of the difficulties that surfaced in earlier missions. This memo seeks to contribute to this endeavour by exploring what can be expected from a capacity building mission of Takuba’s type. This is done by drawing on observations from Afghanistan, especially experiences of ‘accompanying’ within the OMLT.²

Accompanying partners to build capacity

Military capacity building can take place in various formats, including advising on strategic and operational planning as well as basic soldier training in classrooms and through exercises. Takuba enters the scene in Mali at a point when training has been extensively employed to build FAMA’s capacity. Approximately 15,000 FAMA soldiers, out of an estimated total of 17,000, have received training from the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali (figures from April 2020), while circa 7,000 G5 soldiers have been trained by Barkhane (as of 2019).

To accompany partners during military operations differs from other forms of capacity building in key respects. Most importantly, accompanying is characterised by a level of proximity and sharing of risk that we would not expect in other approaches. This reciprocity requires an exceptional level of partnership and trust between foreign capacity-building providers and their local counterparts.

Accompanying partners in a capacity building context is theoretically distinct from direct combat. The idea is for the mission to be a facilitator, not an executor. Among the OMLT in Afghanistan, the expression used was ‘Afghan lead’ – the mentors were not there to solve the Afghan National Army’s (ANA) tasks, but to oversee and support without taking over command. Similarly, Takuba’s aim is to empower FAMA to become autonomous and resilient.

Effectiveness expectations

Despite their differences in mandates and corresponding activities, the international military missions in Mali

¹ At the time of writing, Takuba has been authorised to operate on Malian and Nigerien territory, following invitations from these governments.

² OMLT (2006-2014) was a part of the NATO mission the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), in which mentors drawn from conventional forces supported counterparts from the Afghan National Army (ANA).

share the stated goal of re-establishing state authority throughout Mali's vast territory. Whereas this prospect appears distant by any estimate, a crucial intermediate step is to build the capacity of the Malian forces. Ideally, Takuba's approach of accompanying FAMA will contribute to this step by building units able to conduct operations independently of international support.

Accompanying during operations has the advantage of giving capacity building providers a first-hand understanding of partner forces' conduct and abilities in the field. Takuba will be able to continuously draw on these insights to tailor their applied capacity building strategies. By contrast, training missions such as EUTM lack systematic information on how former trainees perform in combat, and are therefore impeded from adapting their offer accordingly.

Moreover, capacity building is a principal task for SOF, and they are increasingly called upon to offer 'military assistance' in high-risk counterterrorism settings. While capacity building by SOF often aims at prospective elite units within the military or police, SOF are also deployed to support conventional forces, especially in very hostile environments. In the Liptako-Gourma region, where Takuba will be operating, state presence is particularly low and armed attacks against security and defence forces are increasingly deadly.

Even for experienced SOF operators, accompanying partners during operations is a type of 'help to self-help' that calls for sophisticated balancing acts. In contrast to when foreign forces engage in direct action or conduct joint operations with local forces, in a capacity building setting the partners are supposed to retain command of operations. Accordingly, expectations for immediate operational effect may have to be reduced in the interest of avoiding long-term dependence. Observations from Afghanistan indicate that promoting local lead in operational planning and enabling functions is central to achieving sustainable capacity outcomes. Yet, in early stages of mission activities, offering operational guidance as well as reliable enabling functions may be instrumental to rebuilding confidence among partner forces that have suffered repeated defeats.

A general hazard of capacity building is that empowered individuals or units sometimes turn against the host government that the mission is there to support. The prospect that military assistance could – under certain circumstances – increase the likelihood of a coup has been debated at length. Given the fairly recent military coup (2012), this could be a concern in Mali. Moreover, soldiers might shift their allegiances from the regular

army to armed terrorist or rebel groups, especially if they offer better terms of employment. The Malian Prime Minister has declared that FAMA is to be expanded with 10,000 soldiers during 2020. As ex-combatants become part of FAMA, having gone through an accelerated DDR-process, the risk of soldiers switching sides might be amplified. The loyalty problem is well known from Afghanistan, where 'green on blue,' or insider, attacks against international forces resulted in numerous casualties.

Regardless of whether Takuba succeeds in building FAMA's operational capacity, military proficiency on its own is not sufficient to re-establish state authority. The pervasive legitimacy deficit of the Malian state is a breeding ground for radicalisation and a major obstacle to sustainable security. As important for Takuba as the capacity building task itself is making sure the capacity is used in acceptable ways, in accordance with international humanitarian law.

Partnership expectations

As a capacity building mission, Takuba extends and deepens Barkhane's so-called 'strategic partnership' with the national forces of the G5-countries. Even prior to the set-up of Takuba, Barkhane has been conducting joint operations as well as combat support activities with FAMA. Since February 2020, Barkhane and G5 forces are under joint command. Hence, Takuba's novelty is not its support to partners, but that it is dedicated to the capacity building task.

Accompanying partners in a capacity building framework places high demands on individuals to build close relationships. OMLT mentors lived and worked beside their counterparts from ANA, supporting them before, during, and after operations. Testimonies regularly emphasise that becoming 'brothers in arms,' by accompanying during operations, was key to establishing a good relationship. Yet, many OMLT units had restrictions on accompanying, especially outside of their main geographical area. Several contributing countries, France being one example, required prior permission from home for mentors to follow their counterparts out on operations. Swedish mentors made case-by-case risk assessments to decide whether accompanying ANA was appropriate or not. These restrictions notwithstanding, OMLT ended up sharing numerous combat experiences with ANA.

As for Takuba, official declarations signal that accompanying is part and parcel of the mission. Although it cannot be ruled out that some contingents will be limited by national caveats, there is reason to expect Takuba to generally be present on operations

alongside its partners in FAMa. However, like all military missions, individuals will be deployed in quick rotation cycles and have regular scheduled leave. Even if the Takuba coalition organises itself to avoid disruptions as far as possible, implications for the relationship with FAMa may be difficult to avoid completely. At times, OMLT mentors could not join an operation because of scheduled leave, giving rise to feelings of having let their Afghan counterparts down.

To stick to the role of facilitator as far as reasonable is crucial not only for the sake of partnership in itself. For mentors or advisors to go ahead and take command of tricky situations contrasts with the very purpose of empowering partners to act independently. Partner troops may wish to rely on their mentors – or, as in the later years of OMLT, on the close air support they can bring along – rather than fully taking charge of the situation themselves. Considering resource asymmetry, this can be a rational short-term preference for partner forces. The possible tension between immediate operational needs and sustainable capacity building must be recognised for all capacity building missions involving accompanying.

In practice, the boundary between *facilitating* and *performing* during operations will likely be blurred. If a situation escalates to posing a direct threat to the unit, mentors may need to break out of the mentoring role to defend themselves and their partners. In Afghanistan, Swedish mentoring units, when necessary, transformed into combat units to assist ANA in battle and call for ISAF close air support.

There are also situations in which the active positioning of mentors may be essential in the interest of upholding international humanitarian law. Together with their partners from FAMa, Takuba will be entering into an extremely complex asymmetric conflict where antagonists sometimes intentionally hide among the local population. There have been credible reports of atrocities committed by FAMa during counterterrorism operations. In a best-case scenario, Takuba's presence can help to reduce these crimes. In the worst case, Takuba's counterparts will include perpetrators of gross human rights violations. Establishing vetting procedures that consider this risk is one concrete step to avoid the misuse of capacity.

Security policy expectations

The launch of Takuba offers a glimpse of broader security policy debates under way in Europe. The fact that Takuba is not under EU flag suggests that it is not possible to reach consensus about a mentoring mission with a strong element of accompanying – at least not in the

Sahel – at this point in time. Moreover, although it is not publicly known which countries were invited to join the mission, Takuba can be seen as part of France's efforts to Europeanise its Sahel policy. As of June 2020, shortly before Takuba is scheduled to have initial operational capacity, roughly half of France's partners in its European Intervention Initiative (EI2), a non-binding forum for military cooperation, have confirmed that they will contribute with military means. Several countries have declared political support but chosen to exclude military contributions. This reflects the many policy considerations that European countries confront when it comes to joining a mission of this type, such as available defence resources, competing political priorities, and the odds of receiving parliamentary backing.

Whereas SOF-led operations are often shrouded in secrecy, France has chosen to make Takuba a highly public affair from the onset. The decision to give what is essentially a subsection of Barkhane its own public profile signals that France, this time, sees a communicative value to the effort. Indeed, politicians talk openly about the mission, often emphasising its dangerous nature. To take one example, Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde has described Takuba as much tougher and more dangerous than the other military missions in Mali.

By answering France's call to participate in a SOF mission in an extreme security environment, contributors demonstrate that they are both able and willing partners of France in the fight against terrorism. The Swedish government bill, for instance, refers to strengthened ties to France as a goal for participating in Takuba. Presenting its commitment to Takuba as part of a solidarity-based security policy, the Swedish government acknowledges that its reasons for joining the mission stem not only from circumstances in Mali.

Though acceptance of risk is a way to signal credible political commitment, there may be severe political consequences in the event that the risk materialises into casualties among the deployed. Explaining casualties in a seemingly distant conflict, especially one where personnel were not intended to engage in direct combat, could prove challenging. In addition, any implication in violations of international humanitarian law – even if there is no direct involvement – would likely be politically disastrous.

Furthermore, joining a French-led military coalition might have ramifications for contributing countries' other commitments in the Sahel. Just as ISAF was

strongly associated with the US, Takuba in its entirety will likely be associated with France. Considering how disputed the formal colonial power's actions are in Mali and the Sahel, Takuba contributors must be prepared to face mixed local reactions.

It has become commonplace for external actors to acknowledge that military means alone are insufficient to promote sustainable security. Indeed, in their statement from March 23, 2020, the political signatories to Takuba pledge a “robust integrated approach,” able to “address root causes to instability”. This is in line with France's ‘3-D’ (defence, diplomacy, development) Sahel policy, exemplified by Barkhane's projects within medical care, water supply, agro-pastoralism, education, and information access. Yet, combining civilian and military efforts is not without frictions. To take one example, neutrality and the ‘no harm principle’ are central to humanitarian work, but contrast with activities in the world of military assistance. Even between military missions in Mali that share the same overarching goal, different mandates and principals complicate coordination and cooperation efforts. To ensure that different policies play to the same tune, contributing countries are well advised to think of a holistic political strategy for Mali, and seriously consider how contributing to Takuba may affect pre-existing engagements.

Finally, building sustainable partner capacity almost certainly takes longer than anticipated. Takuba is supposed to build FAMa's capacity, eventually enabling the Malian state to assume responsibility for its own security. Yet, external intervention often creates long-term dependency. After two decades of massive capacity building efforts in Afghanistan, and despite security formally being in the

hands of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), Afghan forces are still reliant on international support. One can expect political support for Takuba to be jeopardised if the mission becomes protracted.

Preliminary conclusions

Takuba is designed to empower FAMa and by extension facilitate national security responsibility. However, in the complex world of external intervention, design is only one step on the ladder to success. By exploring what can reasonably be expected from a mission of Takuba's type, this memo has highlighted a few aspects that policymakers are well advised to prepare for.

With its focus on accompanying partners during operations, Takuba's approach to capacity building is intuitively advantageous. However, Takuba should take into consideration the risk of creating long-term dependencies. In addition, Takuba must do its utmost to ensure that resulting skills do not end up being used against the mission's purposes.

Moreover, Takuba's contribution to building FAMa's capacity will largely depend on how the partnership between European SOF and FAMa evolves. Pre-deployment training should provide SOF operators with a deep understanding of the conditions under which FAMa works, including conflict analysis and cultural awareness.

Finally, in any scenario the SOF-coalition's appearance cannot be expected to resolve the complex conflict in Mali. Even if FAMa becomes more capable, so too may the numerous armed groups that are contesting state authority.

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