

# France - A Continuing Military Presence in Francophone Africa

This text is a part of the FOI report *Foreign military bases and installations in Africa*. Twelve state actors are included in the report: China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Russia, Spain, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States.

**In the decades following the 1960s, when the colonial period ended, France continued to regard its former colonies in Africa as an exclusive sphere of influence. Even today, France has several thousand soldiers deployed across the continent in permanent bases and in external operations. Besides strong historical and cultural links, security is currently the overriding motive for France's engagement in Africa. However, the development and future of France's military presence and engagement are not solely dependent on its own will.**

## **A TRADITION OF MAINTAINING A MILITARY FOOTPRINT**

Africa is France's most important theatre of operations, to the point that during the Cold War France was called 'Africa's gendarme', as its military was continually deployed in response to crises or emergencies. From 1945–2005, France conducted more than 130 military interventions in Africa, many of them in its former colonies. The interventions ranged from quick counter-insurgency missions and non-combat evacuations to longer operations, including peacekeeping, among others.

During the post-colonial period, France and its former African colonies maintained exceptionally close relations. This allowed it to retain its influence in the United Nations General Assembly and maintain its claim to great power status.

France relied on its army to preserve its sphere of influence in Africa, as if the continent was its *pré carré*, or 'backyard'. It actualised its engagement through numerous measures, including defence agreements, which created a legal basis for both its military presence, training, equipment, and interventions. It was thus inevitable that the security sectors of the countries involved were modelled on the French system and that

its regular involvement in African security issues was normalised.

In the 1990s, France's Africa policy gradually changed. The turning point was 1994, with the genocide in Rwanda, when France's much-criticised involvement in the country led it to gradually reduce its permanent presence. This trend prevailed as recently as 2012, when François Hollande became president; his expressed vision was to continue in this direction. However, as security in sub-Saharan Africa deteriorated, and with the repeated terror attacks in France, Hollande resurrected France's permanent military presence and launched military operations in both Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR).

Today, France has a military presence in francophone areas of eastern, central, and western Africa. All branches of defence, as well as its special forces, are represented, a commitment of 8,700 troops, half of which are permanently stationed. The pre-existing defence agreements (which were all reworded in 2008 by then president Nicolas Sarkozy) remain as the formal underpinnings of this presence. In all, France has bilateral military agreements, mostly covering military cooperation in training and peacekeeping, with some 40 states in Africa. Its agreement with Djibouti is the last wherein France reaffirms its commitment to the territorial integrity of a former colony.

## **Permanent presence**

France has pre-positioned forces in Djibouti and in four other countries in Africa. Its base in Djibouti, with a permanent force of 1,450 troops, is its largest overseas military base and the biggest permanent foreign establishment in Africa. It is also one of France's two forward operating bases (BOA, *Bases Opérationnelles*

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*Avancées*); the other is in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Both have rotational and permanent personnel, a logistics hub, an armoured vehicle park, and fighting units that not only reinforce ongoing operations in the region but may also be used for operational surges.

In Dakar, Senegal, and Libreville, Gabon, France has regional cooperation bases (POC, *Pôle Opérationnel de Coopération*) that provide special support to their host countries and neighbours. The bases are home to only a few fighting units – to provide protection, but not logistics support – while most of the troops are permanently stationed and deployed for training and exercises.

France also has a territorial defence base on the island of Réunion and a naval base on Mayotte, both French overseas territories in the Indian Ocean. Their missions are operational, to represent and protect the French Republic, and focused on maritime security and illegal migration. Together the armed forces in the Southern Indian Ocean zone comprise 1700 personnel.

#### *Current operations – capacity-building and cooperation*

Emmanuel Macron, president of France since 2017, inherited two external operations in Africa and on several occasions has expressed the ambition, like Hollande, to continue them.

The first, Mission *Corymbe*, was originally aimed at preserving French oil exploitation and other economic interests in the Gulf of Guinea, but nowadays is intended to reduce maritime insecurity and contribute to capacity-building in fighting piracy and illicit trafficking, for example by hosting naval exercises for navies in the region. It is often referred to as a permanent maritime operation, since it has been underway since the 1990s. The mission evolves over time, as the need arises, from a single patrol vessel carrying 50 troops to bigger amphibious assault ships with up to several hundred soldiers.

The second is Operation *Barkhane*, a counter-terrorist operation in the Sahel region. It was launched by Hollande in 2014, with a contingent of 4,000 French troops positioned in cooperation with the five countries concerned, all former French colonies: Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad, a partnership known as the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5S). The G5S cooperation includes border control and counter-terrorist operations, with France assisting in coordination and in overcoming substantial capability gaps.

Its operational headquarters is at its main base, in N'Djamena, Chad, and has troops based elsewhere in the area of operations: in Faya-Largeau and Abéché, in Chad, and at Niamey airport, in Niger. The latter has been called

an intelligence air base, strategically important since it hosts drones that gather intelligence across the entire Sahel region.

Since the mid-1990s, French policy has been to provide security sector assistance to African countries to increase the capacity of their armed forces and assist their taking charge of their own peace and stability. In light of the growing terrorist threat, capacity-building in counter-terrorism, as in Operation *Barkhane*, is inherent to that policy. Even though France is said to perceive the G5S as an 'exit strategy from the Sahel', the force remains dependent on French support. While French official sources continuously underline that France will continue to support this struggle, they add that the time will come when Africa itself must assume responsibility; as President Macron put it, 'the solutions won't come from outside'.

#### *Network of operational support, logistics hubs, and points of departure*

Reinforcing Operation *Barkhane* is an important role for France's permanent bases in Africa. For instance, the base in the Ivory Coast has strengthened the operation and been its

logistics hub, receiving equipment from the naval base in Toulon, France. The French Special Forces assigned to Operation *Barkhane* are based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, which, along with other installations, serves as a point of departure for tracking jihadist fighters and illegal transports in the wider sub-Saharan area. In

Mali, France has troops in Kidal and Tessalit and at a regional base in Gao; and, in Mauritania, in Atar. The bases also provide facilities for the training required by an environment and climate different from metropolitan France.

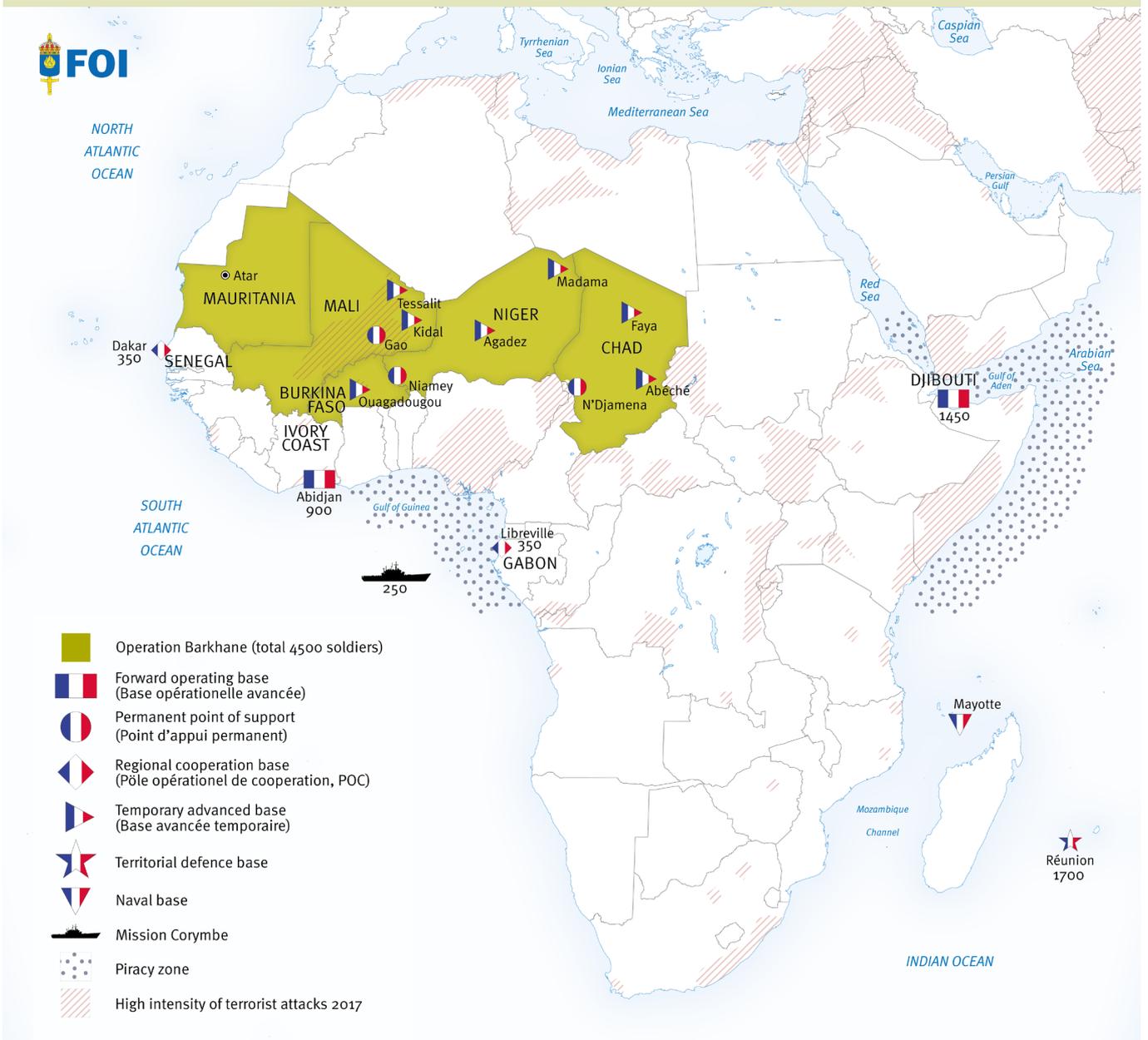
France perceives its network of installations in Africa as providing support for operational deployments and improved responsiveness when a new operation, reinforcements, or a rotation within an ongoing operation, are needed. Many of its bases reflect this perception: the Djibouti base is an operational forward base for missions in East Africa and the Horn; the one in Gabon covers Central Africa; the Ivory Coast base is tasked with covering all of West Africa, but in practice is mainly dedicated to the Sahel region; while the Senegal base covers West Africa and maritime operations in the Atlantic. The regional cooperation bases in Senegal and Gabon also contribute to military capacity-building, both training and mentoring.

#### **PROTECTION OF FRENCH ASSETS AND CITIZENS**

France's 2017 Strategic Review highlighted Africa as a region of strategic importance, and indicated that its

**“Today, France has a military presence in francophone areas of eastern, central, and western Africa.”**

## Assessment of French bases and installations in Africa



Sources: French General Staff of Armed Forces (2019), French Ministry of Armed Forces (2019) Global Terrorism Database (2018), Oceans Beyond Piracy (2018). Note: In Atar, Mauritania, the French have an operational military detachment.

permanent bases are to provide defence and security for French assets and citizens, tasks that can also be linked to ongoing external operations.

### Protecting assets

Many analysts connect French security policy in Africa to economic interests. Numerous small- and global-scale French companies have long been based there, although their number has declined since 2000. The common currency zone, CFA (*Communauté Financière Africaine*), established by France in its African colonies after World War II, lives on. Even though its current economic value

to France is disputed, it remains as another link to 15 of its former colonies.

Today, France is only Africa's fifth-largest exporter, arms trade included. France has a substantial defence industry and used to be a major, and sometimes the only, arms supplier to countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Although no longer Africa's principal trade partner, France's overseas interests have been key terrorist targets since the early 1990s.

France also wishes to ensure access to strategic raw materials, maritime security, and trade routes; these roles are linked to both the base in Djibouti, near the Suez Canal, and to Mission Corymbe. Oil from Gabon is essential, while



French troops are deployed in Niger to secure uranium mines – run by the French state-owned company Areva and important for nuclear power plants and weapons – from terrorists.

### **Counter-terrorism**

France links its domestic security to that of parts of Sahel. When in 2018 President Macron addressed troops in Mali, he underlined that local and regional security threats in Africa could have direct implications for France: ‘A threat that emerges only a few kilometres away from here in Mali will quickly strike women and children in France unless we intervene resolutely and powerfully’. This has led France to focus on francophone sub-Saharan Africa. Trafficking, of humans, drugs, and arms, is a well-known method for financing terrorism and Sahel is a central migration route. Surveillance and intelligence drones are such an integral part of the counter-terrorism effort that in 2017 France decided to arm the drones based in Niger.

### **Evacuation capability and hostage operations**

There is an important human link between Africa and France. Approximately 2.3 million francophone African immigrants, as well as numerous bi-nationals, live in France, while some 270,000 French citizens live on the African continent. Terrorist attacks in Sahel, such as those at a resort in Grand-Bassam, Ivory Coast, in 2016, and against the embassy in Burkina Faso, in 2018, have led to the killing and kidnapping of French nationals, and interventions by French Special Forces.

All French troops stationed at the permanent French bases are ready for non-combat evacuation missions. With the deterioration of the internal security situation in Ivory Coast in 2002, France airlifted 20,000 people out of the country. Since 2015, France has also been obligated to evacuate EU citizens.

### **CONTINUITY RATHER THAN RUPTURE**

There is a broad consensus in France about the advantages of a continued permanent military presence in Africa and, simultaneously, an awareness that counter-terrorism and capacity-building are long-term commitments. It is sometimes stated, in relation to Operation Barkhane, that France’s engagement may last another decade. Thus, there is little appetite for new interventions and France is likely to consolidate rather than expand its presence.

Exactly how France’s military presence and engagements may evolve is not dependent on its will alone. Some analysts see France’s influence in Africa diminishing. With the emergence of a new generation of leaders in many African countries, it remains to be seen how political support for French involvement might evolve over time.

Strained resources, in both equipment and soldiers, are another limiting factor for France’s military engagements, both nationally and abroad. The French troops in Operation Barkhane are already dependent on support from allies, mostly the US.

Since the 1990s, France has increasingly emphasized multilateralisation, meaning an aspiration for deepened European commitment to African security. Besides much-needed financial burden-sharing, multilateralisation serves France’s interest in legitimising its presence. Due to its legacy, its image in Africa and among its occidental allies is complicated.

On the other hand, the fact that more foreign countries have a military presence in Africa means that France faces a new context. While US support in providing strategic resources to France’s troop operations is welcomed, the arrival of China could eventually lead to undesirable competition. The latter is not likely to lead to diminishing France’s interest, but, if anything, the opposite.

To conclude, it remains to be seen how France’s policy on Africa will evolve. For the time being, counter-terrorism will continue as both the driver and the objective. However, the cultural, linguistic, economic, and historical ties, as well as the human links, are also decisive. After all, President Macron is only one successor in a long line of presidents who have seen a need for a continued presence in Africa.

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