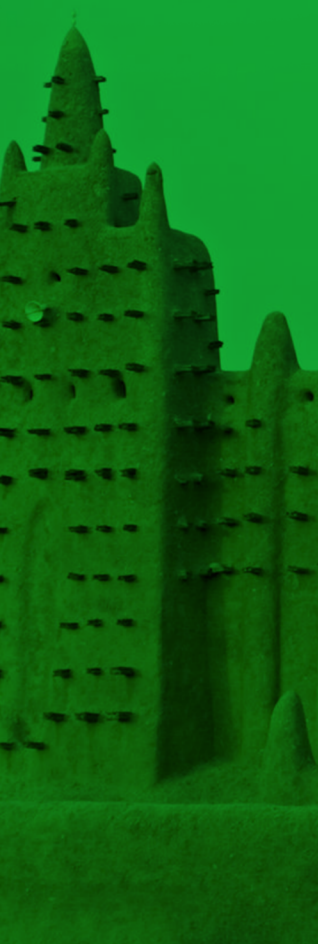


MALI, FRANCE, AND US.

Professor Boubacar N'Diaye

JULY 2022



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“Mali is eternal.”

“Listen, then, sons of Mali, children of the black people...”

“Listen to my word, you who want to know; by my mouth you will learn the history of Mali. ...the “story of ... great Mali.”

D.T. Niane, **Sundiata, Epic of Old Mali** (quoting the griot Mamadou Kouyaté)

“Mali will pay dearly... [for inflicting] a supreme humiliation on our country.”

Christian Cambon, **French Senator, chairman of the Foreign Affairs, Defense and Armed Forces Commission**

Introduction

Over the last few months, whether in Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal, or elsewhere, Africans, the youth in particular, have, in their thousands, frequently and stridently protested French policies in Africa.

This is striking when compared to the attitudes of previous generations. This unmistakable intensification of the rancor against France's policies in Francophone countries' populace and political and intellectual classes alike seems to have now reached most of the rest of Africa's elites. In recent weeks, in major English-speaking countries, (South Africa and Nigeria) political and civil society organizations rallied (in dramatic fashion, in South Africa under the leadership of Julius Malema) to express their opposition to France's policies in its former colonies, singularly Mali, pointedly demanding the withdrawal of French troops from the continent. Clearly, there has been a growing awareness in most of the intelligentsia of many African countries that there is something amiss with the current relations between France and its former 'possessions' on the continent, with Mali as an exemplar. The elites' sense is that there is something new, different in the animosity Mali's transition authorities are facing. The orientations and policies they have enacted since May of last year seem to have particularly irked France's leaders, well beyond the normal disagreement about ephemeral policies and transient interests.

However, while the instinct of a growing segment of the political and intellectual classes in English speaking countries and in the African diaspora is spot-on, it is not certain that most are fully aware of critical facets of what led to the spectacular falling out between these two countries' respective authorities. Only a short few years ago, a beaming, triumphant French president Francois Hollande, visiting Mali, proclaimed that day to be the brightest of his political life, as countless Malian families named their newborns after him, in gratitude for his decision to intervene militarily to stop terrorists who were occupying northern Mali swooping down on Bamako in early 2013.

So, what went wrong, and what are we (concerned Africans, 'Democracy and Development' advocates throughout the world) to make of what has been

has been going on over the last few months between Mali and France? More explicitly, in pursuit of this noble dual objective in Africa, what are we to make of, and what is our responsibility in, this grinding dueling between France, a world power, a leading state in the European Union's foreign and security policy, an activist member of the UN Security Council (and the wheeler and dealer in the UN Peacekeeping Operations in the world), and a weak, poor, chronically on the edge West African state facing an existential terrorism threat? What are the implications for West Africa's and indeed the whole continent's evolution in an international environment that is becoming increasingly hostile to Africans and their interests?

I broach these questions as the former Chair of the African Security Sector Network (ASSN), a Pan-African think tank based in Accra who, in that capacity led, or was member of expert missions, and participated in activities aimed at advancing the peacebuilding process and related Security Sector Reform (SSR) in Mali. I also authored a major report on "The Root Causes and Impact of Armed Conflict and Insecurities on Development," with Mali as the case study, for the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). This experience therefore makes it my duty to weigh in on the ongoing debate on the way forward for this now battered country, but which has such a deep significance for Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora who know their history. This analysis reflects the numerous interactions, formal or informal exchanges and consultations I was privileged to have with several political and security actors and experts, as well as civil society leaders. It reflects also insights garnered during my countless visits to Mali.

I try here to sketch an answer to the questions above and related ones. This endeavor necessarily starts with a brief examination of the state of affairs in this fraught relationship as shaped in recent years. This will make possible a better understanding of the contentious face off and the stakes this holds for the future of the continent. This discussion will, in turn, help point to what can be done to help Mali and the other Sahel countries meet the many challenges they face.

Where are we?

Image source: wired.com



More than a generation ago, an Israeli scholar and diplomat wondered puzzlingly why was it that France could do what it was doing on the African continent, i.e. run rough shot over most of its former colonies, toppling regimes here, invading or unleashing mercenaries there and pretty much controlling the events in most of Francophone Africa, completely unchecked.¹ As I had argued just eight years ago, France was still at it, and pretty much “still getting away with it,” --thank you very much!--the declamations of its presidents notwithstanding!² That was when its latest presidents—Nicholas Sarkozy and François Hollande—had vowed to jettison what had been the quintessence of the foreign policy of all their predecessors: Perpetuating an unsavory connivance between themselves and submissive African leaders and their political classes. That seemingly unshakable collusion known as ‘Françafrique,’ guaranteed them to always have their own way when it comes to their former colonies, during and (even) after the Cold War.

That was then, one could argue. But what about today? Well, since May of last year, something has changed. Mali’s military authorities all but expelled France’s ambassador, suspended two of its main audiovisual media outlets, (scornfully) asked it to accelerate the withdrawal of its troops (which its president had unilaterally and in frustration decided). All of this seems to have supremely irritated France’s leaders. So much

for having their own way, as in the good old days, one could point out! The resulting stand-off is certainly unprecedented in France’s relations with a former colony (with the possible exception of immediate post-independence Guinea). The unprecedented nature of the breakdown of this relationship needs to be understood in its root causes, its significance, and implications. A cursory look at little known aspects of the backdrop to this crisis can help do that and shed some light on this unprecedented situation in France’s traditional ‘sphere of influence.’

There is broad consensus that the current security crisis in Mali and in most of the Sahel region is the direct consequence of the toppling of the Khadhafi regime in Libya, in which France’s former president Sarkozy (it was argued for self-serving motives), members of its intellectual elites, and its western allies played a central role. The emails of Mrs. Hilary Clinton, the former United States Secretary of State, as revealed by Wikileaks, abundantly suggest this. The evidence also clearly indicates that France’s political and security actors sought to exploit Mali’s resulting security woes, they were largely responsible for. The sudden return *en masse* of battle-hardened and heavily armed irredentist Tuaregs of Khadhafi’s Islamic Legion (to whom their French intelligence handlers promised support for an independent state in northern Mali) offered France an opportunity to manipulate both the Malian state and its nemeses. It maneuvered the former into accepting a military presence on

the ground, through Operation Serval and then Barkane, while granting the latter a territorial base by stopping at gun point the Malian army from overrunning the irredentists' Kidal stronghold. It is true that the late president Amadou Toumani Touré (aka ATT) singularly mishandled the resettlement of the returnees. Indeed, he made spectacular strategic blunders. Most notably, in hopes of pacifying them, he showered with gifts these heavily armed combatants without demanding their immediate disarmament, as neighboring Niger, facing similar threats did, to its credit. It is well-known that the returning Tuareg fighters had helped themselves in the armories of Khadhafi which were very well-stocked in sophisticated weaponry. As an army general who also was involved in searching solutions to many internal conflicts on the continent, he certainly should have known better.

As the outspoken, politically savvy transition government Prime Minister Choguel Kokala Maiga keeps insisting, this duplicitous scheme was France's original sin in its current relationship with his country. Dr. Maiga also reported that, incidentally, but not insignificantly, the transition president Colonel Assimi Goïta was one of the commanding officers French troops had prevented from entering Kidal—a Malian city, mind you! Let's remember that one of France's main stated objectives in Operation Serval—which may well have helped prevent the collapse of Mali's central government in 2013, it is fair to say-- was to help the Malian state regain control over portions of its territory (including Kidal). Like other major northern cities like Timbuktu and Gao, Kidal was under the control of terrorist groups which were allied to the main irredentist movement, the MNLA (*National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad*). When Operation Serval got under way, the MNLA was all but wiped out by its Jihadi and narco-trafficker former allies. It no longer constituted a military threat at all. To survive or remain relevant, its fighters had melted away within the various Jihadi groups or the numerous drug trafficking gangs that roamed northern Mali.

It was the near collapse of the state, again, resulting from the chaos created in Libya that led to the March 22, 2012, military coup (the first in 20 years) in a country long considered by many as

the democracy poster child in Africa. The return to the 'constitutional order' in August 2013, with the election of the late President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (aka IBK) (already then, at the insistence of France and the 'international community,' on an imposed electoral timetable), did not resolve the underlying conundrum that led to the coup (see below). It certainly did not straighten out the alarming situation that resulted from France's de facto creation of a territorial sanctuary for Mali's armed irredentists and (accessorily) their former terrorist allies. The latter rapidly consolidated their presence, established social networks, secured illegal smuggling routes and training areas, and built operational bases in vast swaths of land left without state presence whatsoever. This led to the 2014 bloody crisis when, now regrouped MNLA forces violently prevented Malian Prime Minister Moussa Mara from visiting Kidal, under the malicious gaze of French troops, further weakening the Malian state.

The utterances of French political elites since 2012 seem to confirm Prime Minister Maiga's appreciation of what, he believes, were France's designs for his country when it intervened in 2013. In effect, right after the 2015 signing of the Algiers Reconciliation and Peace Accord between a severely debilitated Malian government and a coalition of its northern armed antagonists, then French Defense Minister (and later Foreign Affairs Minister) Jean Yves Le Drian, echoing his Foreign Affairs colleague's pronouncements on record, misrepresented (doubtless knowingly), the mind-boggling complexities of the crisis. He pontificated that the decades-long conflict in Mali was due to a sempiternal fight between "two peoples," one in "the north," another in "the south," who have been unable to live together.³ Le Drian could not ignore the context that led to the crisis, specifically, the steady transformation of northern Mali into a vast no man's land of traffic of all sorts controlled by men whose main concern was definitely not the fate of the "people" to whom he seemed to be alluding. Le Drian could not ignore that the irredentism of the distinct minority of the "people" to whom he seems to refer is far from representing the majority of the "people" living in northern Mali. He could not ignore it because the country of which he was the minister of national defense was their main backer and behind the scenes manipulator.

If indeed words have meaning, and they have consequences, one has to wonder just what message a senior French *Defense Minister's* word choice meant to convey in that context. For perspective, let's consider what would have been the consequences of a defense minister of any country stating, at the height of the mayhem created by the various Corse or Basque terrorist/nationalist/criminal groups, that this was, after all, the result of "two (or three) peoples" in France fighting it out? One can bet that there would have been hell to pay for any such minister and his or her country. Could any African official have gotten away with such a statement?

Another critical question is also worth posing: Is it inconsequential that northern Mali (to which armed groups refer as "Azawad" and ambition to make, if not an independent state, at least a largely autonomous region with extensive prerogatives, including the ability to autonomously enter into agreements in select economic and security matters (which the Algiers Accord seems to grant them), happen to be amazingly rich in strategic mineral resources of all kinds? This backdrop to the relationship between France and Mali, while never officially mentioned throughout the duration of the IBK regime, was simmering and crystalized the anger of Malian patriots. It must be kept in mind to fully comprehend the turn for the worse these relations have taken in recent months.

Yet another facet of the relationship, also seldom mentioned, is the circumstances under which the 16 June 2014 Defense and Cooperation Accord between the two countries was signed. A few months after his electoral victory in 2013 with more than 77% of the votes cast, a genuinely Francophile President Keita, who was enjoying a post-election honeymoon, nevertheless seemed to drag his feet in approving the terms of a Defense treaty France was proposing. Its terms massively favored French interests giving its troops stationed in Mali wide margins for maneuver. Its terms also clearly infringed of Mali's sovereignty, and somewhat hampered its control over its security policies and operations. In short, the agreement seemed to give near carte blanche to French troops and complete immunity for their actions while deployed in Mali. Doubtless, President IBK's hesitation was the effect of a fierce patriotic streak Malian

presidents are known for, evidence of which was in full display when he did not hesitate to rejoin the condescending words of UN Under Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations, the French Hervé Ladsous, in May 2015. In fact, Monsieur Ladsous was given a memorable tongue lashing.

Soon after the postponement of the first anticipated signing ceremony of the treaty, what appeared to be a well-orchestrated pressure campaign was launched in which seemingly all French media outlets, from RFI to France 24 (and other domestically oriented national tv and radios), and from *Le Monde*, to *Le Figaro* newspapers to *Mediapart*, ran versions of the same story suggesting unsavory, if not criminal, relations between a conveniently indicted alleged boss of a crime empire, Michel Tomi and President IBK. The same media reported, for effect, one must presume, that conversations between the two were recorded by French intelligence services. Fragments of these conversations were also leaked to the press. For weeks on end, the French media, relayed by other Francophone outlets, were relentless in suggesting that President Keita may have been compromised by his friendship with Michel Tomi, depicted as a shadowy mafia figure, whose businesses in Africa involved bribing heads of states with abandon.⁴ The record will show that after the Defense Accord was signed this campaign seems to miraculously vanish, giving an unnerved, besieged, President Keita a much-needed respite. All charges against Michel Tomi were later dropped.

If some day, it turns out that these media were indeed manipulated, that should not come as a surprise. It is now established that presumed bastions of press freedom and independence such as the New York Times or the Washington Post (as well as other respected audiovisual media) were, willingly or not, manipulated by US intelligence services in pursuit of US security, political, and economic interests in international crises from Viet-Nam to the two Gulf Wars and beyond.

Finally, to complete this backdrop about the dispute between the two countries, one is entitled to wonder if a resentful France did not take some perverse pleasure in seeing to it that

this former colony go downhill. After all Mali had caused it much grief by insuring the failure of its 1950s Saharan plans and, above all, eagerly becoming, on day one of its independence, a sanctuary for the Algerian government in exile and the mujahideen of the FLN, contributing greatly to its defeat in Algeria.

There is no doubt that the state of the fraught relations between Mali and France and the events that undergirded them constituted a

veritable time bomb. Its fuse was literally ignited when Colonel Goïta and his fellow officers removed retired Colonel Bah N'Daw, whom they had appointed president of the transition, following their first coup in August 2020 against a beleaguered President IBK, and more critically when they drew the consequences of France's reaction to this decision, on top of the underpinnings of its policies toward their country as discussed above. The current crisis is but the effect of the blast of that bomb.

The Consequences

Image source: washingtoninstitute.org



The situation in Mali resulting from the events described above was bound to deteriorate. Terrorism seemed to take root and expand despite the presence on Mali's territory for nearly a decade of thousands of Barkane French troops, hundreds of the Takuba Task Force and EUCAMP, the 15000 MINUSMA troops, on top of troops from neighboring G5-Sahel countries. Thousands of Malians, civilians as well as armed forces, were being killed by ever-daring terrorist groups whose attacks extended now to nearly all the regions of Mali, most definitely the center. This has led to the displacement (both internally and across international borders) of hundreds of thousands of Malians, and the marked deterioration of the standard of living of Malians. The pervasive corruption, reached new heights under the IBK regime, as underscored in the ridiculous over-billing observed in the procurement of military equipment (of all areas!).

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The growing malaise and sense of despair led to a lingering feeling within the population that decidedly Mali was definitely handed a raw deal. It was certainly unsettling to many Malians that, with the satellite capabilities of France and its western partners hovering and reputed capable of reading time on a watch or sensing the heat of a cigarette lighter from space, hordes of motorbike riding terrorists who trot hours to wreak havoc on army bases and peaceful villagers across Mali somehow could not be detected. Mali's political class and opportunistic and ambitious Muslim clerics seized on this popular sentiment to put on the defensive a seemingly spent President IBK, and ultimately forced him to resign under the pressure of the military, as chaos threatened to engulf the country. This followed weeks of popular rallies and the impasse reached despite the mediation of Mali's partners, ECOWAS, in particular. The legendary fragmentation of Mali's political class, rooted in the dispiriting self-serving ethos of its leaders (certainly too many of them), all but dictated the intervention of the military in these conditions.⁵ Kati (the military base location near Bamako where all coups originated), contrary to the promise once made by President IBK,⁶ not only threatened Bamako (metaphor for the legitimate civilian authorities, and seat of power), but in fact pushed it aside and took control of the political game, to the grateful relief of the Malian people. Unfortunately, What I have called in my research on civil-military relations "the after-coup dynamics,"⁷ predictable as a sunrise, were not far behind. For some reason post-coup environments never fail to provide, retired colonel-farmer Bah N'Daw, appointed transition President and the then Prime Minister Moctar Wane, seemed to forget who the real bosses of the transition--any transition from a military regime-- were, in this case, the officers of the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP). Doubtless to their shock, they realized that the boss was not ECOWAS or France.

Mali's crisis would certainly not have taken the dramatic turn it took without the worsened conditions of the security sector in general, the army in particular since 1992, the beginning of the democratic era. The country had no army to speak of (much less an entire well-functioning security sector) when the Libyan crisis broke out in 2011. That was the result of commissions and

omissions that started under the presidency of Alpha Oumar Konaré the first democratic era president. It remains a mystery whether President Konaré, like many political and civil society leaders in Africa at the time was determined to get back to the security sector for the abuses they suffered under military rule or simply lacked the acumen to understand the importance of an effective security sector for a democratizing state given his country's long history of armed violence. Whatever the motivation of this neglect of the military and the security sector at large, this critical mistake made the army, once a powerful, well-equipped powerhouse in West Africa, an empty shell.

Given the looming security situation in the north of the country with recurring insurgencies, the various peace agreements notwithstanding, it was eminently injudicious to significantly decrease spending on the armed forces, as a percentage of the GDP over many years. Robbed of sorely needed resources the military was also left to the shady mismanagement of its high-ranking officers, without any effective oversight of the political authorities (civilians in the executive or parliamentarians). As a consequence, it was thoroughly 'deprofessionalized.' In addition, there was an "inflation" of generals for such a small army as an expert put it to me, many of whom suspected of engaging in ethically questionable activities (not the least of which was the recruitment in the officer corps or in lower ranks of their progenies or delinquent male relatives), all in an atmosphere of generalized indifference.

Consequently, as Oumar Coulibaly's investigation found, the troops were neglected, left to their own device, "disarmed" and left to languish in miserable living and service conditions, all of which made them no match to the "jihadists, more motivated [more ruthless, certainly] and much better equipped than they [were]."⁸

Unfortunately, this neglect continued under President ATT, which explains in large part the near collapse of the army when a coalition of determined, and heavily armed irredentists and terrorist hordes attacked the country shortly after the assassination of Khadhafi in October 2011. Of course, the 22 March 2012 military coup and its aftermath (a large number of murders

and embezzlement on a large scale committed during the chaotic regime of Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, from March 2012 to August 2013) divided further an already fractious and restless army. This gave it a very poor image among Malians. This embarrassing situation of the army that did not improve by the time he came into office (to succeed a de facto military regime, though presided by Professor Dioncounda Traoré), and the urgency in carrying out the necessary reforms were bluntly acknowledged by a newly elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in his speech on the 53rd anniversary of the Malian army, on January 20, 2014.⁹

Nonetheless, one of the dubious legacies of the IBK regime (which, again, it does share with all predecessor regimes of the democratic era), was to not have taken seriously enough the absolute necessity of reforming, indeed transforming its military, particularly after the crisis that befell it following the Libya debacle. Neither the Malian people, nor its military were served by leaving the army unreformed and therefore woefully ill-equipped to meet the challenges that emerged with a renewed irredentism ostensibly backed by foreign actors (not just France, by the way), and the resurgence of the terrorist onslaught carried out by AL Qaeda, the ISGS, or by their homegrown sidekick, Ansar Dine. France could not ignore that Security Sector Reform (SSR), rightly a key stipulation of the Algiers agreement, the reequipment and retooling of the Malian security sector were the priority of priorities if a post 2013 Mali were to have a chance of success. Where was then its intransigence with current military authorities when it was most needed throughout the IBK regime on this crucial question? Wouldn't the perpetuation of this unworkable and pernicious status quo guarantee that French troops will remain in Mali forever? If that is the case, why would France ever want to change anything it has been doing since 2013? The answers to these questions should alarm, even terrify us all. They should certainly terrify the heirs of Modibo Keita.

But this is not to exculpate in the least previous Malian civilian authorities of the last three decades, certainly not IBK (may God rest his soul) and his various political allies for seven years! The primary responsibility rests with them, not France. Correcting this major failure also

rests with Malians, starting with those in charge of the transition, again, not France. The lesson to learn here is that to maintain the status quo in the defense and security area, that is, principally, France pretty much remaining in control, would not produce a different outcome than during the last ten years. Who doubts this? This may well have been what the current transition authorities have realized. Another vindication a *contrario* of Einstein's now famous definition of insanity.

Thus, when the CNSP reasserted its control, in May 2021, resetting the transition, an entirely new ball game was to commence, in which France, again, through the acrimonious statements of its president, ministers of foreign affairs and national defense, respectively, and other political and security actors, became a protagonist—in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state.

France and its allies (in Mali and elsewhere) have insisted that it is the illegitimate nature of Mali's military junta "authors of two coups d'état," seemingly bent on remaining in power the longest possible that justify their hostility. However, it is indisputable that all hell seems to have broken loose only when Mali's transition authorities decided to break free of the de facto exclusive security arrangement with France (and the EU it duly brought in) and try its luck with other partners, particularly Russia. The central argument for ostracizing Mali also relates to its purported association with Wagner, a Russian private security outfit. Wagner was depicted as an absolute bogymen, a villain, any connection with which justifies France's complete withdrawal from Mali. Such an association with the devil incarnate is supposed to taint and shame forever Mali's authorities. In this obsession with Wagner, the fact that the *Légion étrangère* which constitutes a sizeable component of the French armed forces deployed outside its territory, is made up of men who would perfectly fit most definitions of 'mercenaries,' never comes up. Furthermore, the widespread use by all western armed forces of private security companies (most notably the United States), particularly in operation theaters (Iraq and Afghanistan come to mind), does not seem to constitute a handicap for France's partnership with the US and others.

Could Goita and his team's shrewd decision to engage Russia (and even Wagner!) to try to

meet the unaddressed security needs of their country be the incontrovertible reason Mali found itself in its current predicament, with punishing economic and financial sanctions from both ECOWAS and UMOA? After all, President Macron had no qualms traveling to N'Djamena to stamp his seal of approval on, and the AU to nod approvingly, the putsch that brought to power army General Mahamat Deby, son of the deceased president Idris Deby Itno, in April 2021. It is evident that through their statements and actions Mali's transition authorities have shaken to its core the sanctified edifice of *Françafrique*. One of the most sacred pillars of that monument to hegemony and exploitation is to never, ever, defy openly France and to never venture out of this forced marriage with France, certainly not on defense and security issues. Not even to flirt with its western allies, such the United States, much less with perceived mortal competitors like Russia or China, or even Turkey. For daring to consider approaching the United States to negotiate a better deal for their country's economy or security, Congolese Pascal Lissouba, and before him Hissène Habré of Chad and (later) Mamadou Tandja of Niger, learned bitter lessons about that in the 1990s.

Knowing all that, it is astonishing that ECOWAS Heads of state and Governments have so readily adopted the French line and rationale for punishing the Malian state, and through it the Malian people, worsening an already desperate socioeconomic situation. It does not serve the credibility of ECOWAS, its leaders, or its integration objectives that President Macron signaled repeatedly that, essentially, the actions of the organization including the sanctions are urged by him. One cannot but wonder, as doubtless do peoples in West Africa, what interests of an African regional economic community can objectively, be served by taking sanctions, (some of which clearly never consecrated in its norms or practices), against a Member State, when such sanctions are "urged," some would argue, dictated, by the president of a country with the record France has in its former colonies? This is a crucial question to answer in the tug of war that prevails between Mali and ECOWAS (and, make no mistake about it, France). ECOWAS leaders cannot, certainly should not, dismiss the widespread perception that, for many Francophone intellectuals, a

growing segment of civil society organizations and even political parties, France's political elites still consider its former colonies as preserved domain and are keen on continuing to exploit their resources and prevent, by any means they can get away with, any alteration of this abhorrent relationship. These sorry mentality and attitude have survived more or less sincere promises to renounce them for the last sixty years, at least. They have proven stubborn in generations of French elites with a few exceptions, notably M. Jean-Luc Melenchon, and other left-wing political leaders and intellectuals, who fortunately, have been true to the values often associated with France of 1789 and *La Commune*.

France's leaders and their allies have repeated at length that 57 of its soldiers "have given their lives for Mali" and that Mali should show more gratitude toward France. While they were reminded that thousands upon thousands of men from 'French Sudan' (Mali's colonial name) have shed blood to help free France from the terrorism of Nazi Germany, it is useful to remember here the admonition of none other General De Gaulle that "states have no friends, they only have interests." One of the frankly silly attitudes of the champions of some of France's policies is to dismiss accusations that it is acting first and foremost in pursuit of its national interest, particularly in its former colonies. They prefer to always suggest that French policies and actions have benevolent, altruistic motives, the benefits that may accrue to it being incidental, even when rewarding, such as halting illegal emigration or preventing the spread of terrorism to the European continent. This approach is an insult to the intelligence of Malians and Africans. One has only to refer anyone who peddles or believes such nonsense to De Gaulle's nonchalant, dispassionate wisdom! In its stand-off with Mali, France is out for itself, in pursuit of its national interest. Period. Whether or not we consider that interest to be legitimate. We can even posit that some of it can be entirely legitimate. However, human rights, democracy and the fate of the Malian people, their security and welfare do not stand a chance if they get in the way of that national interest. That's the simple truth.

It is quite possible that for France and its elites, to maintain its status as a world economic and military power, its vital national interest is that the

essence of these relations with its ex-colonies, such as they are, are perpetuated. For these same former colonies and a growing segment of their elites, to fully enjoy their sovereignty, it is as essential that they free themselves from precisely

this kind of wholly undesirable relationship. This is of course the fundamental contradiction (as Marxists would say) which cannot be ignored, and which will have to be resolved.

What Is to Be Done?



Regarding some of the criticism addressed to the transition authorities in power in Mali, it is always a sure bet that men have always as part of their motivations selfish interests they will not readily acknowledge. Therefore, it is not beyond Mali's current authorities to harbor schemes to prolong their stay in power, even beyond the 24 months to which they restricted themselves in the decree dated 6 June 2022. Let us also concede that some of them might even be tempted to continue the Unwholesome policies of their predecessors and enrich themselves in the process, even though, so far, there is no indication of this. The meticulous surveillance they are subjected to—

with the whole world watching --will prevent such behavior. Thankfully, the intense scrutiny they receive—with the whole world watching-- may preclude such behavior. That being said, one cannot ignore that, the reality of French policies and actions in recent years in Mali more than justify their aspiration to want to break free from this dysfunctional security arrangement which, evidently, did nothing to meet the stated objective of securing the Malian people and stabilizing the country. The transition authorities therefore deserve on the part of Africans the benefit of the doubt. A stance that must be coupled with vigilance and circumspection, given the record of juntas on the continent. When they and their allies complain that France is out to punish them

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with the help of its cronies in ECOWAS and the West African Monetary Union on which President Macron seems to have such a strong influence, their cries should not be dismissed out of hand.

Besides the often threatening or insulting statements of the French president and his ministers, they also point to French senator Christian Cambon's menacing words. His threats should not be taken lightly. France is (in) famous for its vindictiveness toward those who dare to challenge its domination or interests. Such vengefulness was amply illustrated in its many former colonies that defied its vital interests or preferred policies at some point. France's devastating reaction to Guinea's 1958 'NO' to its proposed Franco-African Community scheme and its overthrow or destabilization in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s of regimes that attempted to escape its neocolonial domination (Central African Republic, Comoros, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Mauritania, etc) attest to that. The massacre of Hundreds of thousands of Africans this *patrie des droits de l'Homme* (the fatherland of Human Rights) committed in Algeria, Tunisia, Cameroon, Madagascar and elsewhere are still vivid in the collective memory of its former subjects. In other words, Malians must be extremely vigilant, as France will not spare any effort to make them pay for what it considers a slap in the face (not to mention a substantive geostrategic defeat of its economic and security interests). Already, doubtless at France's instigation (as its current chair), the EU has adopted a hostile stand toward Mali. It has also unashamedly tied EU support to African states to the position they adopt in the new Cold War ignited by the Russia/Ukraine conflict. In this case, hoping to receive EU assistance also means for African states to side with Ukraine and endorse western sanctions against Russia, the very country Mali and other African states are prepared to engage in pursuit of their security and economic interests... as they dare to define them!

To complicate matter for African states still, the United States House of Representatives on April 28, 2022, passed, and referred to the Senate, H.R.7311 bill cited as the "Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act." President Biden—himself the Cold War warrior he remains-- will doubtless sign it into law when

it reaches his desk. When enacted, this law has the particularity of targeting exclusively African states, authorities, economic actors, and ordinary citizens, including individuals in the Diaspora. Its objective seems to be, certainly its effect will be, to force African states, particularly former French colonies, to remain in France's sphere of influence, and unable to carry on any relationship with non-western partners in this Cold War 2.0. The nature of their relationships with other powers, mainly Russia, but also China, is left to the sole scrutiny and assessment of American bureaucrats and policymakers. Africans, their allies, and democracy and development advocates had better pay attention. It is worth recalling here the admonition of Nelson Mandela, the late president of South Africa who, freshly out of Apartheid prisons, visiting the United States, schooled journalist Ted Koppel and his audience. He observed gravely that one of the mistakes some westerners tend to make is to believe that their enemies must be Africa's enemies. He concluded: "We can never accept that!" This was true as the Cold War was ending; it remains true today. Africans must also contend with the unfortunate reality that with this impending law, the Biden Administration may well have renounced the United States' once lauded post World War II anticolonial attitude and policies, which logically should not only have endured, but encompassed the diehard colonial mentality that has remained very much alive in many French establishment members.

One observation is inescapable: The outcome of the tribulations Mali has been going through because of the patriotic stand Colonel Assimi Goïta and his team have taken has the potential of undermining, indeed obliterating altogether, the whole paradigm of the relationship, taken as inescapable between France and its former colonies. Herein resides the necessity for all Africans who have decried the nefarious legacies of the Berlin Conference, the Brazzaville Conference spirit (even the Yalta Summit) paradigms and frameworks that have suffocated countries like Mali to take notice. It may determine the future efforts to ensure the security and development of not just Mali, as the epicenter of the Sahel security crisis, but all of the former French colonies. Civil society and the political classes of many African countries seem to have realized that this is what's at stake in this

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To succeed Mali needs Africans and all those who rightly condemn military intervention in politics.

David and Goliath epic battle, to use a biblical allegory.

In this standoff with France, Mali *must* succeed. Its success means to come out more secure and having adopted the institutional and legal foundations of a genuinely democratizing state. Mali was exemplary as a democracy up until the 2012 coup, despite many shortcomings and eventual regression due to the greed and lust for power of many in its political class, and the errors accumulated, particularly during ATT's final mandate. Mali can do it again. It can shine again. Its centuries old civic culture allows it. Mali, the Mali of the Sunjata epic, embodies a culture of tolerance, wisdom, and dignity, all based on a deep understanding of the human condition, that gave the *Kurukan Fuga* Charter of 1236 to the world.¹⁰ Mali gave us also the patriotism, pan-African steely convictions, quiet dignity and incorruptibility of Modibo Keita, its first president. It gave us the exemplary transition to civilian rule after a coup d'état thanks to the statesmanship of a certain Lt-Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré, whose approach became a model for the continent.

To succeed Mali needs Africans and all those who rightly condemn military intervention in politics. Their principled stance on this issue cannot weaken. As one who coined the phrase “a military coup d'état, a God sent calamity,” I certainly can't disagree with his principled stance, particularly given the alarming remilitarization of African politics of late. It is the reason many honestly oppose Mali's military authorities. However, such a principle and commitment to democratic norms, must also encompass an equally indispensable dedication to addressing the conditions that lead to coups in the first place. We must avoid a certain fetishism of elections, that seem to resume France's, and ECOWAS' position to justify their piling up on Mali, and

not to the same degree other countries where coups also occurred. As if the speed at which elections are organized has anything to do with the conditions that led to a coup or the incipience of a democracy that will address them or reduce such a country's vulnerability to future coups.

Now that Colonel Goïta and his Transition team members have set an irrevocable duration for the transition in their country, it is incumbent on advocates of 'democracy and development' to ensure that the transition succeeds. The reforms they have promised are sound, broadly supported by the Malian people, who instinctively know that they will increase the likelihood of ushering in a democratic dispensation that will consolidate a secure environment for elections and reduce drastically the probability of another military intervention. Because neither Mali, nor Africa can afford another *éternel recommencement* à la CAR, we must hold them accountable for their promises and hold their feet to the fire between now and the end of the transition. Again, much rides on the success of this undertaking. What is at stake is the very future of truly decolonized relations between Africans and their former masters, in this case, France. Among measures to reflect our support but also our vigilance as we closely monitor the transition to ensure that it is conducted with fairness and transparency, we must demand a comprehensive audit when it wraps up. Such an audit the report of which to be made publicly available to all, must be conducted by a commission made up of Malians of renown who are of impeccable intellectual and moral probity, joined by other Africans meeting the same criteria, who stood by Mali in these trying times.

After all, aren't we all in this together? Indeed, we are!

References

- 1 *Tamar. Golan, “A certain Mystery: How Can France Do Everything That it does in Africa and Get Away with It?” *African Affairs* 80 (318), 1981, pp. 3-11.
- 2 See Boubacar N’Diaye, “Still getting Away with It.... France’s Africa Defense and Security Policy” 302-315, in James Hentz (ed.), *The Routledge Book of African Security*, 2014.
- 3 *Le Monde*, June 23, 2015, p. 14, citing the J-Y Le Drian’s interview on Europe 1).
- 4 The onslaught of French media, which continues unabated, indeed with a vengeance, since the suspension of RFI and France 24, reminds one of the words of the late Guinean President Sekou Touré who theorized that his media, the state-controlled propaganda savvy ORTG, was the “tank of the Guinean revolution.” Decades later, collectively, the French media, which the state heavily funds, are of course much more sophisticated. Those who pay close attention to the huge impact the audiovisual media have in shaping public opinion will notice the daily deluge of sometimes tendentious coverage of Mali in its major news programs and panel discussions. It is unmistakable that the only perspectives on Mali, even from invited African ‘specialists,’ do not deviate much from the French orthodoxy in the analysis of the Malian crisis, its origins, meaning, evolution, the actions of the transition authorities, and the operations of the armed forces. Some of this coverage, as in the case of the events in Moura and the ethnic angle shamelessly exploited, smacked of good old fashioned psychological warfare!
- 5 I had then pleaded that the political class and civil society who demanded the resignation of IBK see to it that this not be the outcome of the crisis—another coup d’état.
- 6 A newly elected IBK had famously declared that “never again will Kati threaten/frighten Bamako.”
- 7 See Boubacar N’Diaye, “Not a Miracle after all... Cote Ivoire’s Downfall: Flawed Civil-Military Relations and Missed Opportunities” *Scientia Militaria* 33 (1), 2005.
- 8 See Oumar Coulibaly, “Notre enquête : L’armée malienne: Clochardisée par 20 ans de gestion chaotique,” available at <http://www.maliweb.net/societe/notre-enquete-larmee-malienne-clochardisee-20-ans-gestion-chaotique-412452.html> (accessed 23 June, 2022).
- 9 President Keita’s speech is available at <http://www.maliweb.net/armee/53-ans-apres-la-creation-de-larmee-malienne-un-bilan-desastreux-selon-ibk-190916.html> (accessed 22 June 2022).
- 10 This is the founding Constitution and social contract of the Mandé (also Mandingue) empire, promulgated by Sunjata Keita as he consolidated his power. Since 2009, it has been on UNESCO’s intangible cultural heritage of humanity list.



Centre for Democracy & Development
Centre pour la démocratie et le développement

16, A7 Street, CITEC Mount Pleasant Estate,
Jabi Airport Road, Mborora District, Abuja, FCT

www.cddwestafrica.org



cddav@cddwestafrica.org



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