



# STRATEGIC FILE

No. 1 (37), January 2014 © PISM

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## Return to the Future: France's New Flirtation with Afro-Realism

**Nathan Dufour**

*France's latest bout of interventionism in Africa in 2013 (Mali, Central African Republic) has led to harsh internal public scrutiny of Françafrique and its strategic rationale. France's continued economic and security role in Sub-Saharan areas is out of step with its limited ability to sustain a standalone approach. To answer this shortfall, France appears more than ever committed to a multilateralisation of its actions, not least through a Europeanisation and Africanisation of its historical responsibilities in Africa. Its approach is likely to strengthen Africa's status as a focus of European Security and Defence Policy and may push Poland to initiate a strategic reflection of its own interests in that part of the world.*

France has played a key role in developing an African dimension to Europe's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). However, this has only been possible thanks to a shift from the early realist roots of its own policy. Over the course of 15 years of progressive reforms, Paris has downgraded its monopolistic and economically driven motivations and has stressed instead a more general responsibility towards the continent. This has allowed it to lead interventions in its former colonies whilst sharing the associated burden with others. Now, with its economy in trouble, France's economic interests are returning to the fore at the same time as its need to draw in further partners is intensifying. This raises the question of whether the return to realism in France's Africa policy will allow it to continue to share its burdens.

### **Progressive Reform of Post-War French African Policy**

France's post-colonial ties to Africa are still encompassed in the term *Françafrique*;<sup>1</sup> however, the meaning of the term has shifted significantly in the past half century. Following the independence wave (1950–1960s), which formally dismantled the French empire (i.e., Northern, Western and Central Africa, Madagascar and Djibouti), a system of high-level personal networks was elaborated under President Charles de Gaulle's supervision. These aimed at keeping control over the former colonies for strategic purposes. France therefore managed to preserve important privileges in its former dependencies, notably through a set of political, economic and military agreements. The CFA franc (*colonies françaises d'Afrique*) was created in 1945 and guaranteed by the French treasury. Moreover, since African armies in these countries were French-trained, the French army took on certain political powers. Importantly, nearly a third of the former

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<sup>1</sup> This term was apparently coined in 1955 by Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the former president of the Ivory Coast (1960–1993), to express the very strong relations existing between France and its (former) colonies. However, it is François-Xavier Verschave, a French economist and journalist, who made it popular in his sulphurous book, *La Françafrique, le plus long scandale de la République*, published in 1998.

colonial administrators remained in African administrations instead of re-integrating into domestic structures.<sup>2</sup>

The approach was essentially realist. For the sake of preserving France's interests, successive French governments supported various corrupt dictators who showed little respect for human rights and democracy.<sup>3</sup> Permanent French military bases in Africa and secret clauses allowing for interference in internal affairs represented a double-edged sword for local regimes: acting as a military back-up if needed but equally as a millstone around the regime's neck in case French strategic interests were not sufficiently taken into account. The system was replicated in a range of Sub-Saharan countries (Gabon, Niger, the Central African Republic, Djibouti, Chad, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, the former Zaire, Rwanda, Madagascar, Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, Togo) with negative implications for the local population.<sup>4</sup>

France's Africa policy was thus three-pronged: to recoup some of its lost international influence; to procure strategic resources; and to profit from the creation of economic monopolies.<sup>5</sup> Following the end of the Cold War, however, French efforts to monopolise the international relations of its former colonies foundered. In 1994 alone, the devaluation of the CFA franc to align with the neoliberal Bretton Woods institutions ended privileged trade links that were reliant on the parity with the French franc, a turn of events exacerbated by the mismanagement of ethnic tensions in Rwanda and suspicion over French participation in the genocide, as well as by the closure of French immigration policy.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the collapse of the Soviet Union strongly affected the French's so called exception in the bipolar structure and its role against the rise of communism in the region, as did the creation of new local and regional aspirations on the African side. Meanwhile, at home, the French government faced criticism for the inefficiency of its highly politicised public aid, as well as the hold African ex-dependencies had on the Elysée.<sup>7</sup>

Responding to African states' quest for diversification as well as growing economic competition in the region, France's "special" relationship with its former colonies there underwent a major shift from 1998. This has involved a reformulation of development aid to be less interest-driven, and an increased emphasis upon political stability, good economic governance, as well as the opening up to Anglophone African countries.<sup>8</sup> Finally, this changing atmosphere inaugurated the launch of EU missions and operations in the traditional French sphere of influence. Over the last 15 years, successive French presidents have admitted the need to reform French African policy. If a certain degree of reform has resulted from these calls for change, President François Hollande's claim to have distanced himself from the *Françafrique* legacy even before his appointment to office once again illustrates the persistence of a certain circularity in French foreign policy-making. And yet, in many ways, Hollande's attempted reforms mark a return to the policy's realist roots, albeit on new terms.

## France's Renewed Afro-Realism: Is It Realistic?

In 2013, two main strategic documents defined a renewed French approach towards Africa: April's "White Paper on Defence and National Security"<sup>9</sup> and December's report ordered by the Ministry of Economy,

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<sup>2</sup> P.Y. Séraphin, "De la nécessité de combattre la Françafrique," *Le Filament Magazine*, no. 12, January 2010.

<sup>3</sup> M. Berouk, "Only a *Folie de Grandeur*? Understanding French Policy in Africa," *African Security Review*, vol. 17, iss. 1, January 2008, p. 116.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> R. Xavier, "A New French Policy for Africa?," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 20, iss. 1, 2002, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ph. Marchesin, "La politique africaine de la France," *Politique africaine*, no. 71, October 1998, pp. 92–94.

<sup>7</sup> For about 30 years, the "African exception" was institutionalised through the elaboration of a specific administrative structure called "Cellule africaine de l'Elysée." This special cell was directly supervised by the president himself thanks to the appointment of a trusted person. This approach heavily contributed to the personalisation of the *Françafrique* system and has remained a crucial component of current relations.

<sup>8</sup> R. Xavier, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> "Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale," 29 April 2013.

“A Partnership for the Future: 15 proposals for a new economic dynamic between France and Africa.”<sup>10</sup> Both documents herald the return of Africa—in particular the Sahel and the broader Sub-Sahara—to France’s top foreign policy goals, but do so under new, more realist terms. These documents prescribe a return to economic interests in policy formulation, as well as a shift away from costly, French-led security interventions. Yet, a close reading betrays the difficulties of such a policy, highlighting the inevitable role of the security provision as the basis for economic co-development as well as a continued desire for French “strategic autonomy.”

### *Disinhibiting the Pursuit of Economic Interests*

The December report on building “A Partnership for the Future” strongly recommends that the government “disinhibit” the pursuit of French economic interests in Africa, and identifies African-French historical ties as the best way to benefit from the whole of Africa’s economic growth. According to this line of thinking, the recent progressive French debate about *Françafrique* thus belongs firmly in the past, since it hampers the potential of new “African partnerships,” as seemingly called for by the Africans themselves. The report thus calls for a three-fold approach that consolidates French economic activities in Africa, acknowledges the strategic importance of its existing sectoral interests, and diversifies its activities geographically.

The first approach is consolidation: in the period 2000–2010, France’s total exports to Sub-Saharan countries increased by 126%, and France remains one of the top shareholders of trade in the “CFA Zone” (14 countries), with 17.2% against China’s 17.7%. Total French FDI went from €6.4 billion to €23.4 billion between 2005 and 2011. Yet, France’s overall market share in Sub-Saharan Africa—although still significant—is shrinking (from 10.1% to 4.7% between 2000 and 2011), notably in favour of China. In the words of the economic minister, France needs, consequently, to develop a more offensive logic that would help it to consolidate its positions in key sectors, including extraction, services and so called original equipment manufacturers.

The second approach is the strategic importance of its investments. For about half a century, 70% of French imports from Africa have been energy-based. According to the report, this situation is not likely to change in the near future. Hence, preserving its takeover of primary energy resources will remain a central goal of France’s African policy. The major change is that it should become more explicit. Despite official statements to the contrary, therefore, the French interventions in Mali and in the CAR cannot be completely disconnected from its geostrategic and economic interests in the broader region.<sup>11</sup>

The third, geographically speaking, is that French economic activities have diversified over time. Although French SMEs remain concentrated in “Francophone” Africa, larger companies (Areva, Bouygues, Bolloré, Total, Vinci, Orange, Alstom, Sanofi, Technip or Schneider Electric) are now well-integrated into non-French-speaking countries in the region. Indeed, South Africa and Nigeria are now France’s first trade partners in Sub-Saharan Africa (making up about 30% of total exports on their own), while the Ivory Coast, Senegal, Gabon, Cameroon, Angola, Togo and Mauritius together account for 40% of French exports. This transformed trade situation requires an update of policy to shift it from a post-colonial relationship to a modern cross-continental one.

As part of its new offensive approach, France is now expected to convert its various cultural and economic assets in the region into influence, notably by facilitating procedures for economic visas, supporting infrastructure financing, appealing to the African diaspora and securing French investments in Africa.

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<sup>10</sup> “Rapport au ministre de l’économie et des finances,” “Un partenariat pour l’avenir: 15 propositions pour une nouvelle dynamique économique entre l’Afrique et la France,” December 2013.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, French nuclear power plants produce 75% of the country’s electricity needs. About 40% of France’s total uranium imports originate from Africa (Niger in particular). AREVA, the world leader in the nuclear industry and in which the French government is the majority shareholder (86.52%), owns mining concessions in Niger, CAR, Gabon, Namibia and South Africa.

Besides this liberalisation, it is also likely to capitalise on other advantages, including:

- i. excellent knowledge of the region—the product of strong diplomatic networks and well-established economic actors (France is the third largest investor in Sub-Saharan Africa);
- ii. a common language (there is a French-speaking population in Africa of about 100 million people);
- iii. the maintenance of the “CFA zone” (covering 135 million people), the exchange rate of which remains under French Treasury supervision;
- iv. a permanent military presence contributing to the security of its investments (more below);
- v. its status as a result of aid donations (France remains the second largest donor of bilateral aid to Africa, contributing €2.6 billion per year, which constitutes 45% of total French public aid);
- vi. a large French diaspora in Africa (a total of 235,000 French nationals live in Africa and 2.3 million African immigrants or French citizens of African origin live in France);
- vii. its position as a crucial employer in Africa, notably through large companies (including those mentioned above).

### *Dilemmas in the New French Approach*

Besides the obvious difficulty of creating a new kind of partnership with African countries—including those outside its former empire—based on old cultural and historical links, the new approach contains two central dilemmas for France.

The first rests on its desire to reduce the need to resort to security interventions, preferring hands off, liberal means. Quite simply, such liberal means are ineffective without the provision of security. What is more, the White Paper recalls that an increased human and economic presence requires long-term securitisation. And in this respect, African countries’ inability to provide long-term, or even immediate answers to domestic and transnational threats further promotes French sentiment that preserving its aptitude to intervene remains a priority.

Moreover, recent events highlight the incapacity of light-touch security interventions to provide genuine answers to the deteriorating security context, particularly in the Sahel. Despite a relatively high number of troops deployed (4,500 soldiers at the peak of the conflict), the war in Mali has reinforced existing threats as well as created new ones.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has formally advised French citizens not to travel to numerous countries (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, the CAR). This travel restriction, at a time when France is prescribing a more open visa regime as the basis for its regional policy, clearly illustrates the dilemma.

The second set of difficulties is related to France’s desire to mutualise the burden for providing security in Africa and secure international legitimacy for its actions. The government’s tremendous diplomatic efforts to multilateralise and Europeanise its operations, as well as “Africanise” them in cooperation with the African Union and other regional players, mean that France is now committed to:

- i. systematically acting under United Nations Security Council mandates;
- ii. strongly lobbying for political, financial, logistic and military support from the EU and its Member States and other international partners (often difficult to obtain and subject to political bargaining);
- iii. speeding up African solutions to African problems, notably through the African Union, while fully operationalising the AU’s African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA);<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> These threats appear at three levels: national (i.e., a revenge-based sentiment deepening inter-ethnic tensions in the north), regional (i.e., a mutation of trans-border terrorist networks and activities), and international (i.e., a new magnet for international jihadists, including those living in EU countries).

<sup>13</sup> To this end, President Hollande declared on the margins of the Elysee Summit for Peace and Security in Africa (6–7 December 2013) France’s intention to train up to 20,000 African soldiers per year. The final declaration of this summit also mentions France’s full support to the “African Union’s efforts to reach full operationalisation of the

- iv. remaining the privileged interlocutor to relay African problems to European and international institutions;
- v. insisting on the threats posed by destabilisation in Africa to European countries' interests in the region and to their own territories—the EU through CSDP is therefore urged to support French efforts;
- vi. promoting Responsibility to Protect (R2P) initiatives in EU and UN forums.

There is all this and yet the economic pressures that have persuaded France to reconsider its standalone role in Africa have also served to reinforce the role of its strategic self-interest. Despite—or perhaps because of—growing competition in the economic sphere, France maintains its tendency to consider the region as falling within its natural sphere of influence and continues to play on its historical and cultural links with the continent. Thanks notably to its pre-positioned forces in the Ivory Coast, Chad, Burkina Faso and the maintenance of permanent military bases (Gabon, Djibouti, Chad, Senegal, Reunion), France remains the only European power to possess a mixture of political readiness and operational flexibility that allows it to offer rapid alternatives to the still clear capability-expectation gap exhibited by the EU and UN.<sup>14</sup> Surprisingly, therefore, half a century after independence, France has managed to preserve its rank as first regional security provider, although by default, mainly in crisis situations (including in the Ivory Coast, Mali, the CAR).

Moreover, France's new strategic documents reiterate its desire for so called strategic autonomy, the concept at the heart of its White Paper. This marks a significant challenge for its ability to mutualise its responsibilities in Africa. Indeed, one strand of the report is dedicated to the challenge of maintaining autonomy despite budgetary pressures and seems to assume this can be achieved by a more targeted use of resources. And yet, here too France is dependent upon its European partners, since EU pooling and sharing and NATO Smart Defence require coordinated specialisation by participating Member States.

Faced with major planned cuts (of about 15%) in its deployable capabilities, France's reliance on logistic and financial support from its partners—EU or other—has become obvious since the war in Libya. This tendency has been further confirmed during the *Serval* and *Sangaris* operations in 2013.<sup>15</sup> And indeed, France now expresses its intention to balance its operational needs through the principles of differentiation and pooling and sharing of scarce and critical capabilities.<sup>16</sup> But in official documents, more attention is focused on adapting the French forces to a broader range of eventualities than on acknowledging that certain tasks will be taken over by its partners. While France still struggles to not be too reliant on its allies' capabilities, it has seemingly lost its European reflexes due to a certain disappointment with the EU's repeated lack of support.<sup>17</sup> Smaller and better-adapted rapid deployment forces instead constitute France's operational response to the difficult economic context and worrying security dynamics in Africa.

## Conclusions

France's emerging Africa policy signals a return to the initial rationale behind the establishment of *Françafrique*, namely: (1) preserving its takeover (monopolistically if possible) of primary energy resources;

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African Standby Force (ASF) and its Rapid Deployment Capability (RDC) by 2015, as well as the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC)."

<sup>14</sup> N. Dufour, "France: An African Power despite Itself," *Is this the Future of Europe?* (blog), 3 December 2013, [http://blog.pism.pl/en/Is\\_this\\_the\\_Future\\_of\\_Europe?p=1&id\\_blog=20&lang\\_id=13&id\\_post=122](http://blog.pism.pl/en/Is_this_the_Future_of_Europe?p=1&id_blog=20&lang_id=13&id_post=122).

<sup>15</sup> Following the emblematic Libyan case, the French army has required once again urgent logistic and intelligence support from its allies on short-notice with Operation *Serval*. About 30% of all air lifts needed by the French army in Mali were provided by its EU partners (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, UK).

<sup>16</sup> France's "low-cost autonomy is supposed to be achieved above all by two means. Greater differentiation would see the better adaptation of military resources to different types of tasks, be this deterrence, protection, crisis management, coercion or war operations. And the pooling and sharing of scarce and critical capabilities, not least with European partners, is supposed to promote a better allocation of resources and allow for the development of strategic enablers that surpass national capacity." For additional details, see N. Dufour, "France's Intent at the December Defence Council: Opportunities for Poland," *Bulletin PISM*, no. 138 (591), 17 December 2013.

<sup>17</sup> The fact that France did not even try to mobilise the Weimar battlegroup in Mali is emblematic in this respect.

(2) bolstering both its direct and indirect key roles in security matters and the international privileges related to it; (3) building on a highly politicised personal network at the highest level. Yet, this return to realism may well weaken the support France receives from its international partners. After all, it was the progressive normalisation process launched in the late 1990s—and now apparently proving detrimental to France's economic interests—that provided the basis for the mutualisation of its responsibilities in Africa and allowed for the launch of the first EU military operations. The same pressures that are pushing it to upgrade its economic interests are persuading France to reduce its security exposure in Africa.

The effect on European policy of these French dilemmas is once again playing out, with the Council's decision on 20 January for a new deployment. This new small-scale CSDP operation in CAR (about 500 soldiers securing Bangui) constitutes only an additional and temporary answer to the immediate security preoccupations of the population, while much remains to be done to answer this deeply-rooted crisis. Thus, other European states will have to decide whether to support this and future French-driven interventions, asking whether they are prepared to step in and take on a role that could benefit France, or whether they would prefer to stand back, watch France get sucked into the role of principal security-provider then free-ride on Paris. The dilemma affects Poland particularly clearly: Warsaw has limited interests in Africa, but is tempted by French calls for a mutualisation of responsibilities to the EU's south by the prospect of a reciprocation of joint efforts to the east.

Given this broader interest, Poland should look for a means of engagement with Paris. Here, it could usefully stress the differences between France's old realism and its new approach. For instance, the new readiness to articulate economic interests—security interests, incidentally, which not only drove its original *Françafrique* policy but lay at the heart of its progressive phase, too—signals greater transparency in French activities. This matters. Despite unanimous political support from the UN Security Council and the European Council in the face of massive risks for the local population, suspicions about France's hidden motives remained during operations *Serval* and *Sangaris*. Suspicions also remain about France's, direct or indirect, role in the declaration of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), which pushed CAR Interim President Michel Djotodia and Prime Minister Nicolas Tiengaye to immediately resign their posts.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, as the dilemmas in French policy become increasingly clear, Poland should be prepared to exploit upcoming crises in French action. When Paris seeks to mutualise its responsibilities in the region, Poland should take the opportunity to also mutualise its interests by securing much-needed reciprocal French involvement in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. A more transparent approach by not only France but also other EU Member States that shows in a comprehensive manner what are the interests at stake is also becoming a precondition for more CSDP support on the ground, particularly if operations and missions such as EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel lead to a Europeanisation of the risk related to counter-terrorist activities. This problem of mistrust should not, however, mask long-term challenges that are likely to come from Africa and that will require common answers, notably those related to its exploding demography and need for human security.

As such, Prime Minister Donald Tusk's statement that Poland will contribute to France's effort in the CAR is a positive signal of Poland's growing international responsibility and solidarity. Nevertheless Warsaw's interests in Africa remain very limited in contrast to those of France. The direct potential security repercussions for EU territory, as argued by France, is extremely limited in Poland's case in terms of the potential threats for its own population and/or economic interests in the region. Hence, Polish involvement should always take place through the EU and promote a strategic civil-military mindset that could better contribute to bringing about long-term responses to African crises. What is more, the last Polish contributions to CSDP operations (including Chad, Mali and CAR) should be tightened by proper strategic thinking towards Africa that could, for instance, avoid it being involved unconsciously in the costly pursuit of French interests.

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<sup>18</sup> See, "Centrafrique : comment la France a précipité la fin de Djotodia," *Le Monde*, 10 January 2014, [www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2014/01/10/centrafrique-comment-paris-a-precipite-la-fin-de-michel-djotodia\\_4345567\\_3212.html?xtmc=djotodia&xtr=10](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2014/01/10/centrafrique-comment-paris-a-precipite-la-fin-de-michel-djotodia_4345567_3212.html?xtmc=djotodia&xtr=10).