



# THE CONSENSUS ON MALI AND INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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## INTRODUCTION

The transition towards multipolarity in the international system has concerned many observers in recent years. They fear ‘an era of disorder and greatly diminished multilateralism owing to miscalculation, uncertainty and distrust between the new and established powers’.<sup>1</sup> This is based partly on the assumption that multipolarity will create competition rather than cooperation as international actors promote or object to intervention in conflicts based on their own geostrategic, economic or political interests.<sup>2</sup>

The stalemate at the United Nations Security Council regarding

<sup>1</sup> Wiharta, S., Melvin, N. and Avezov, X., ‘The new geopolitics of peace operations: mapping the emerging landscape’, SIPRI Project Report, Sep. 2012, <[http://www.sipri.org/research/conflict/pko/other\\_publ/NGP-Policy-Report.pdf](http://www.sipri.org/research/conflict/pko/other_publ/NGP-Policy-Report.pdf)>.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, K., ‘United Nations collective security and the United States security guarantee in an age of rising multipolarity: the Security Council as talking shop of the nations’, *Chicago Journal of International Law*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2009), pp. 79–81; and Zhongping, F. et al., ‘Global security in a multipolar world’, Chaillot Paper no. 118, Oct. 2009, <<http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/global-security-in-a-multipolar-world/>>, pp. 125–29.

the conflict in Syria, driven in part by China and Russia vetoing stronger action, seemed to reaffirm the suspicion that multipolarity will lead to increasing fragmentation within the Security Council.

Recent events in Ukraine have also increased anxiety among observers: with the isolation of Russia, will consensus over conflict resolution break down completely?<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, traditional powers such as the United States are concerned about the implications of a non-democratic superpower, as China’s economic and political influence increases.<sup>4</sup>

In 2013, however, the Security Council mandated eight new complex peace operations in Africa. One of them, the UN Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), led to extensive debate about whether counterinsurgency

<sup>3</sup> Avezov, X., ‘The new geopolitics of peace operations: a dialogue with emerging powers’, SIPRI Workshop Report, Apr. 2014, <[http://www.sipri.org/research/conflict/pko/other\\_publ/ngp-europe-and-north-america-workshop-report](http://www.sipri.org/research/conflict/pko/other_publ/ngp-europe-and-north-america-workshop-report)>.

<sup>4</sup> Xia, M., “‘China threat’ or a ‘peaceful rise of China’”, *New York Times China Rises Companion*, [n.d.], <<http://www.nytimes.com/ref/college/coll-china-politics-007.html>>.

## SUMMARY

● The transition towards multipolarity in the international system has concerned many observers in recent years. This is based partly on the assumption that multipolarity will create competition rather than cooperation as international actors promote or object to intervention in conflicts based on their own geostrategic, economic or political interests.

While the stalemate at the United Nations Security Council over the conflict in Syria, the growing isolation of Russia following events in Ukraine and persistent suspicion in the West about the implications of a Chinese superpower all seem to reaffirm this assumption, the international community’s ability to swiftly respond to the conflict in Mali demonstrates that cooperation among emerging and traditional powers is attainable in a multipolar world.



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mandates are appropriate for UN peace operations. In Mali, where four of these eight new operations took place, cooperation and coordination among emerging and traditional powers and the variety of organizational bodies involved were critical. While opinions diverged

among some traditional and emerging powers in this case, their relative consensus and responsiveness contradicted the notion that a multipolar world leads to fragmentation.

This policy brief explores the drivers of consensus in the case of Mali and analyses the larger policy implications for the future of international conflict management.

### **NEW PEACE OPERATIONS IN MALI**

On 20 December 2012 the UN Security Council authorized the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) to assist the Malian authorities in regaining control over their northern territory following a military coup and the seizure of the territory by rebel groups.<sup>5</sup> A regional military force consisting of primarily West African troops, AFISMA was to be led jointly by the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and was set to be operational in September 2013. However, when rebels captured the strategic town of Konna in central Mali in January 2013, the Malian transitional government requested additional assistance and France responded

<sup>5</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2085, 20 Dec. 2012, para. 9.

immediately with Operation Serval. AFISMA's deployment was subsequently accelerated.

On 25 April 2013 the Security Council replaced AFISMA with the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). MINUSMA was given a robust mandate with the right to use 'all necessary means' to perform its tasks, including protecting civilian centres and taking proactive steps to 'prevent the return of armed elements to those areas'.<sup>6</sup> Operation Serval was given formal status as a parallel force to MINUSMA, with the mandate to conduct counterinsurgency operations that fell outside MINUSMA's scope.

### **REACHING A CONSENSUS**

Despite remaining deeply divided over some cases, such as Syria, the established and emerging powers were able to agree on a collective response to the evolving crisis in Mali. In fact, Security Council resolutions on Mali were passed unanimously and implemented without much controversy, unlike UN Security Council Resolution 1973 authorizing the military intervention in Libya.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, although French policies relating to its former African colonies tend to be viewed with suspicion, and despite the fact that Operation Serval did not initially have a Security Council mandate, countries such as China, India, Russia, South Africa and the USA commended France for

<sup>6</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2100, 25 Apr. 2013; and Tardy, T., 'Mali: the UN takes over', EUISS Issue Alert 10, May 2013, <[http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Alert\\_Mali.pdf](http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Alert_Mali.pdf)>.

<sup>7</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1973, 17 Mar. 2011.



its leadership rather than openly questioning the legality of its actions.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, the views of the key actors diverged on some points, particularly regarding the overarching goals of the operations, the level of involvement by regional actors, the military nature of the operations and the appropriate level of robustness for a UN peacekeeping operation. In contrast to Western Security Council members who emphasized the importance of restoring democratic order in Mali, China and Russia were more concerned with protecting Mali's sovereignty and territorial integrity after the de facto secession in the north. Another point of contention was the role of regional organizations, with China, India, Russia and South Africa arguing for greater involvement and consultation with regional actors, while traditional powers did not view it as a priority.<sup>9</sup>

The military nature of the operations in Mali was the subject of some debate. The AU and

South Africa believed that a peace enforcement mandate for AFISMA, and later MINUSMA, was crucial for containing extremist elements in Mali and restoring stability to the Sahel region.<sup>10</sup> China expressed concern about the underlying French interests behind Operation Serval as well as the legitimacy and long-term effectiveness of a counterterrorism operation.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these concerns, however, China did not formally oppose the operation—neither as a unilateral intervention force, nor as a parallel force to MINUSMA. As for the counterterrorism aspect, the Chinese ambassador to the UN actually told the Security Council in May 2013 that the African countries at the forefront of this fight should not be left to their own devices.<sup>12</sup> Some observers believe that China's faint opposition to Operation Serval was a diplomatic facade and that, given its investments in Mali and especially in the greater Sahel region, it ultimately benefited from the French military intervention.<sup>13</sup>

Russia stood out in the debate about the robustness of the UN operation in Mali, as it was reluctant

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<sup>8</sup> See Musakwa, T., 'Leading Africa expert in China: French intervention in Mali was necessary', China Africa Project, 30 Jan. 2013, <<http://www.chinaafricaproject.com/france-china-mali-he-wenping-cass-beijing/>>; Agence France-Presse, 'Pentagon chief hails French action in Mali', Global Post, 21 Mar. 2013, <<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/130320/pentagon-chief-hails-french-action-mali>>; Powell, A., 'In South Africa, a rare support of French intervention', Voice of America, 4 Feb. 2013, <<http://www.voanews.com/content/south-african-shows-unusual-support-for-foreign-intervention-in-mali/1596868.html>>; and 'French intervention in Mali evokes reaction from Asian powers', Rising Power Initiative, 12 Feb. 2013, <<http://www.risingpowersinitiative.org/french-intervention-in-mali-evokes-reactions-from-asian-powers/>>.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations, Security Council, 6905th meeting, S/PV.6905, 22 Jan. 2013, p. 18; and United Nations, Security Council, 6882th meeting, S/PV.6882, 10 Dec. 2012.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations, Security Council, S/2013/163, 15 Mar. 2013, p. 2; and United Nations, Security Council, 6882th meeting, S/PV.6882, 10 Dec. 2012, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Yun Sun, 'How China views France's intervention in Mali: an analysis', Brookings Institution, 23 Jan. 2013, <<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/01/23-china-france-intervention-mali-sun>>.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations, Security Council, 6965th meeting, S/PV.6965, 13 May 2013, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> 'China as a free rider,' *New York Times*, 9 Aug. 2014; and Lando, B., 'Intervention in Mali: another free ride for China?' Huffington Post, 15 Mar. 2013.



to provide MINUSMA with an overly robust mandate just after the Security Council had established the FIB in the DRC. In the words of its ambassador to the UN, Russia was ‘disturbed by the growing shift towards the military aspects of UN peacekeeping’ and the increasingly blurred lines between peacekeeping and peace enforcement.<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, Russia voted in favour of the resolution authorizing MINUSMA given the urgency of the situation and the fact that the Malian authorities and relevant organizations had themselves

requested it.

However, Russia made it clear that MINUSMA would be a peace operation in the traditional sense

and its mandate would not include any offensive or counterterrorism operations. That said, Russia did not object to Operation Serval and did not oppose the clause in Security Council Resolution 2100 authorizing French forces to conduct counterterrorism operations for MINUSMA.<sup>15</sup>

### EXPLAINING THE CONSENSUS

The consensus on Mali was driven by a number of key factors.

First, state consent, and therefore sovereignty, was never questioned since the Malian Government expressly requested France’s assistance and welcomed both AFISMA and MINUSMA. This

factor was particularly relevant for China and Russia, as both are sensitive to the issue of state sovereignty, champion non-intervention in internal affairs and have repeatedly vetoed Security Council resolutions on Syria due in part to the lack of state consent.<sup>16</sup> The intervention in Mali was framed as a way to preserve the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country, allowing China and Russia to compromise on their differences and agree to relatively forceful intervention.

Second, Operation Serval, AFISMA and MINUSMA were largely focused on combating Islamic terrorism. Although the mandates of AFISMA and MINUSMA, in particular, extended beyond this goal, framing the intervention in Mali as a fight against terrorism and Islamic radicalism was favourable for both Security Council members and regional organizations because (a) counterterrorism reinforces the importance of protecting state sovereignty and security as the main driver of intervention, and (b) traditional and emerging powers, including most Security Council members, have had their own experiences with Islamic radicalism and often use similar language to justify internal and external intervention.<sup>17</sup> For example, India, which has been vocal about what it has perceived to be the abuse of the Responsibility to Protect by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Libya, welcomed the French intervention in Mali

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<sup>14</sup> Permanent Mission of the Russia Federation to the United Nations, Statement by H. E. Ambassador, Vitaly I. Churkin, 25 Apr. 2013, <[http://www.russiaun.ru/en/news/sc\\_mali](http://www.russiaun.ru/en/news/sc_mali)>.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations, Security Council, 6952th meeting, 25 Apr. 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Macfarquhar, N. and Shadid, A., ‘Russia and China block UN action on crisis in Syria’, *New York Times*, 4 Feb. 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Yakovenko, A., ‘Combating terrorism is high on the G8 summit agenda’, *The Telegraph*, 29 May 2013.



because of the focus on combating terrorism.<sup>18</sup>

Third, framing the intervention in Mali as a struggle to maintain security and governance was not as controversial as, for example, establishing a democracy or investigating human rights violations. Although the mandates of both AFISMA and MINUSMA included civilian, humanitarian and state-building aspects, the focus on restoring security and containing instability was something on which all parties were able to agree.

Fourth, the lack of conflicting interests in Mali facilitated better cooperation and a greater willingness to negotiate differences. While France had obvious interests in Mali, other key actors had fewer interests in the region. Brazil, for example, in its vaguely positive response to intervention in Mali, stressed its support for the AU and the importance of dialogue and de-escalation.<sup>19</sup> Other actors generally benefited from the prevention of an escalation in Mali in terms of international and regional security, and were therefore willing to support France despite its potential ulterior motives.<sup>20</sup> China, in particular, stood to gain from intervention in Mali as it had about 1500 nationals residing there and substantial investment in the region.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> 'India's reaction to Mali conflict differs from Syrian, Libyan crises', *Times of India*, 4 Feb. 2013.

<sup>19</sup> 'Military uprising in Mali', Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22 Mar. 2012, <<http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/sala-de-imprensa/notas-a-imprensa/sublevacao-militar-no-mali>>.

<sup>20</sup> John, M. and Irish, J., 'Analysis: Mali—one African war France could not avoid', Reuters, 13 Jan. 2013.

<sup>21</sup> For information about China's investment in the region see Schellhase, J., 'China's Chad courtship', *The Diplomat*, 26 June 2012;

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Despite growing concerns over the ability of the international system to respond to conflict in a multipolar world, the case of Mali demonstrates that consensus and cooperation at the Security Council is possible.

Several factors that led to activism in Mali point to the potential for traditional and emerging powers to overcome their differences in the deployment of missions and within conflict management as a whole.

*1. Robust interventions are more feasible when state consent is not questioned.* Emerging and traditional powers are more likely to agree on robust action, especially if such action is perceived to promote global and regional security, when the issues of sovereignty and state consent are clear-cut.

*2. Different overarching normative aims do not impede action.* The aim of restoring democracy by Western powers and the focus on territorial integrity and sovereignty by emerging powers are not mutually exclusive and therefore do not necessarily impede action.

*3. The focus on counterterrorism promotes consensus.* The focus on restoring security and curbing Islamic extremism provides a solid ground for consensus, while

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Burgis, T., 'China to expand Niger operations', *Financial Times*, 20 May 2010; and Siyu, Z., 'China looks to Africa for an alternative source of cotton', *China Daily*, 16 Dec. 2011. On China's investment and Chinese nationals in Mali see Shinn, D., 'China's response to the Islamic threat in Mali', *China US Focus*, 21 June 2013.



avoiding more controversial topics such as democratization.

*4. The involvement of regional actors is not a priority.* While emerging powers argue for the greater involvement of, and consultation with, regional actors, China, Russia and South Africa do not see it as a precondition for action.

*5. Emerging powers prefer to keep robust intervention outside the UN.* China and Russia, in particular, seem more concerned with keeping counterinsurgency outside UN peace operations than preventing the militarization of peace operations in general.

***Emerging powers prefer to keep robust intervention outside the UN***

*6. The BRICS countries do not constitute a power bloc.* Their different

positions on robustness indicate that they will not act as a power bloc and thereby cause fragmentation within the international system.

*7. The absence of contradictory interests in mission areas is essential.* A consensus over new operations, especially of the robust kind, is more likely when traditional and emerging powers do not have contradictory interests. Furthermore, emerging powers stand to benefit from robust Western interventions when they promote stability in regions where both emerging and traditional powers have substantial investment.





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