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The End of Operation *Barkhane*

Tactical victories and strategic failures in the Sahel.

Mestrado em Ciência Política e Relações Internacionais: Segurança e Defesa

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Abstract:

In June 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that Operation *Barkhane* would come to an end in 2022. This announcement came while Paris had been involved in a bitter conflict against jihadist groups in the Sahel for more than seven years. Drawing on newly available empirical data, this study provides through the prospect theory approach to foreign-policy decision-making and process tracing an explanation for this particular outcome. Some had identified that the short-term events were responsible for the end of Operation *Barkhane* in 2022. This investigation brings forth elements indicating that the aggregation of long-term limitations to the French strategy in the Sahel had a significant part to play in this decision.

Sumário:

Em Junho de 2021, o Presidente francês Emmanuel Macron anunciou que a Operação *Barkhane* iria acabar em 2022. Este anúncio foi feito enquanto Paris estava implicado num conflito impiedoso contra grupos jihadistas na região do Sahel há mais de sete anos. Baseando-se em novos elementos empíricos, este estudo traz, através do abordagem teórico da perspectiva no processo de decisão da política externa e com a técnica de rastreamento de processo, uma explanação por este particular desenlace. Alguns tinham identificados que os acontecimentos diretamente antes do fim da operação eram responsáveis para o fim de *Barkhane* em 2022. Esta investigação apresenta elementos indicando que as agregações das limitações no longo prazo da estratégia francesa no Sahel tiveram um papel significativo nesta decisão.

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Keywords: Sahel region; counterterrorism; France; intervention; Operation *Barkhane*.

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I. Introduction.

1. Research problem.

A year and a half after the end of Operation *Barkhane* and the subsequent expulsion of French forces from Burkina Faso in February 2023 and Niger in December 2023, the security situation in the Sahelian region has worsened significantly. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), which reports violence against civilians in Africa, has recently published data demonstrating the extent of this disaster. The last two years have been the deadliest since the beginning of the conflict in the early 2010s (Nsaibia, 2023). Jihadist groups are now extending their zone of operation towards the Gulf of Guinea, crossing the borders into Togo, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire, thus confirming the prediction of a spillover of the conflict over the whole of Western Africa (Crisis Group, 2023). In addition, the already jeopardised regional stability has been shaken by the tense stand-off between ECOWAS and the military juntas of the Sahel, leading to increased tensions and the paralysis of transnational counter-terrorism initiatives (TV5 Monde, 2023; Jeannin, 2023).

Paris is not the only one to have been forced out of the Sahelian region. Washington has recently decided to start a progressive withdrawal from Chad and Niger, where it had invested heavily to support counter-terrorism initiatives (Copp, 2024). The European Union was also forced to put an end to its training missions in Niger in early 2024, while the ten-year-long training mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) has been suspended since 2022 (and ended in May 2024). London and Berlin, whose commitments were limited to logistical support and training, had also organised their withdrawals from the Sahel after the coups (Shankar, 2022). Paris was the most involved in the region, and that by a large margin. Yet the support from other Western nations had been crucial to all multilateral security efforts to tackle the jihadist insurgencies. The United Nations mission in Mali, the MINUSMA, heavily depended on that support (United Nations, 2018). Even Operation *Barkhane* could have not been held in the long term without logistical and intelligence support from the United States and the United Kingdom (Singlehurst, 2020; Malshie, 2021).

To replace their Western partners, the Sahelian juntas have tried to strengthen their relationship with other actors. First and foremost with Russia, which had inherited parts of the legacy and experience the Soviet Union had on the African continent, and which had been acting in the last decade as a challenger to the established order throughout the world (Besenyő, 2020; Ramani, 2023). Since 2021, the Wagner Group, a network of different private military companies with formal and informal links with the Kremlin, has been the vanguard of the renewal of Moscow's influence in the region and has been followed by the deployment of heavier capabilities from Russia (Audinet & Dreyfus, 2022; Ramani, 2023). While Russia's (re-)entry into the region's security landscape has been the most visible, Turkey has become a strong defence and economic partner to the juntas (Griogoriadis & Fusiek, 2022). Ankara had been the first to talk to the Malian putschists after the 2021 coup and has since then provided drones and expertise to the juntas in Ouagadougou and Niamey (Donelli, 2023; Griogoriadis & Fusiek, 2022; Lebovich & Van Heukelingen, 2023). As Jabbour (2021) and Bartosiewicz (2022) recall, Turkey and Russia are important competitors for Paris, with whom tensions have never been as high as today. Losing the Sahel to those rivals was without a doubt an important strategic blunder on its own.

The aftermath of the French exit from the Sahel invites us to assess the legacy of its military involvement in the region since 2013. One could thus produce this first interrogation: What is the legacy of Operation *Barkhane*? Surely, this would imply looking at the meaning of the military operation and its place inside the French foreign policy towards the region. Operation *Barkhane* was part of a broader strategy to tackle instability and the jihadist threat in the Sahel; one that was imagined and applied by Paris to the region since 2013, in part to preserve stability as well the French interests and influence in the region (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022). Considering the current situation, one would have difficulty pointing out any success achieved during the ten-year-long intervention (Bensimon & al, 2023). Still, by the time of the end of *Barkhane* in November 2022, few would have considered it a complete failure (Guiffard, 2023).

As it stands, the challenge of evaluating its repercussions and by-products has been taken on only by a handful of scholars and journalists. Indeed, it is no easy task, as important

obstructions would impede such a study. The difficulties in assessing the legacy of the ten-year-long involvement come from different elements: the freshness of the events at stake, as the withdrawal took place only a year ago; the current informational war between Paris and Moscow in the region, which has produced misleading elements as well as deceptive conclusions, and spread it all over the mediatic landscape (Vircoulon, Antil & Giovalucchi, 2023); or simply the lack of academic studies on the region at the time and post- French exit, as the degraded security situation and the hostilities of the juntas have made it nearly impossible to conduct field studies in the Sahelian states (Bartlett, 2023).

To assess the legacy of Operation *Barkhane* with the information nowadays available, one can argue that it is valuable to decompose the chain of events and to study its landmarks events to improve our understanding of the intervention and its consequences. One of the most significant milestones is its end, thus apprehending the circumstances behind the French withdrawal from the Sahel would provide valuable elements to the nascent academic debate on the problem at stake. All this questioning should also encompass the strong economic and security interests that France maintains in the region, the same ones that had motivated the military intervention. As such, it invites us to answer another question: Why did Paris put an end to Operation *Barkhane* in 2022, despite enduring interests in the Sahel?

The few existing pieces of journalistic and academic work have mainly been directed towards building an understanding of how Paris has lost much of its influence in the region and how this forced the withdrawal. The main elements of the answer have been that French forces were primarily expelled from the region by the military juntas, which had obtained power through the coups of 2020-2022 in Mali and Burkina Faso with the help of Moscow's anti-West informational campaigns (Kayali & Caulcutt, 2023; Naranjo, 2023). The subsequent coup in Niger in 2023 seems to have confirmed that assessment (Châtelot, 2023). Still, this cannot fully account for Paris' decision to withdraw from the Sahel in 2022. Operation *Barkhane* was programmed to end in 2022, as announced by French President Macron in July 2021, after the May 2021 coup in Bamako (Vincent, 2021). As French forces resumed their work with the Malian

army (FAMa) after a short cessation of joint operations following diplomatic condemnations of the coup, the French leadership decided the reorganisation of Operation *Barkhane* into a smaller operation, which would have replaced it and drastically limited its scope as well as its resources (Haidara & Traoré, 2021; Lebovich, 2021). This implies that other elements were most certainly at play when the decision was made.

The limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel, and more importantly the perception of those limitations by the French decision-makers, were cited as a significant factor in the decision to transform Operation *Barkhane* in July 2021 (Lebovich, 2021). More importantly, some have pointed out that while the coups and Russia's actions have played an important role in the decision to act on the end of Operation *Barkhane*, it is the conjuncture of short and long-term circumstances that is more likely responsible for the French withdrawal, the partial failure of the French strategy in the Sahel being the most significant (Erforth & Tull, 2022).

2. Aim of the study.

This work attempts primarily to provide new elements and new arguments to the academic discussion on the end of Operation *Barkhane* in 2022. More precisely, it seeks to participate in the academic debate on the impact short and long-term circumstances had on the decision to withdraw from some parts of the Sahelian region in 2022. As mentioned earlier, much attention has been given to the short-term elements, namely the coups, the overt hostility from the juntas as well as the populations, and the implantation of Russian influence in those countries. Accordingly, they seem to be the first drivers of this decision. Still, since there are limited pieces of literature presenting alternative explanations, investigations in this paper are concentrated in the opposite direction, and the study is thus oriented towards the long-term circumstances.

Those long-term circumstances and their link with the end of Operation *Barkhane*, as well as the relationship between those long-term and short-term circumstances, were for the most part already outlined by other scholars. As explained earlier, Bansept & Tenenbaum (2022) invited

us to take a closer look at the role of the operation in the greater French strategy in the Sahel. This study hence brings forth a description of this policy towards the “*bande sahélo-saharienne*” (Sahel-Saharan strip) – the name given by French officials to the strategic region of Mauritania, Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Additionally, their work hints that this strategy was subject to numerous limitations throughout the 2010s, influencing the progressive exit from the region (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022). However, as of April 2024, no further academic work has been done on that last element. There lies the gap that this study seeks to fill. It is thus hypothesised here that the long-term limitations of the French regional strategy applied to the conflict in the Sahel had a significant impact on the decision to end Operation *Barkhane* in 2022.

It is important to reassert here that the problem at hand is that the French decision-makers planned on ending Operation *Barkhane* even though there are persisting French interests in the Sahel. As such, this paper integrates an account of French interests in the region and their historical and recent evolutions. Likewise, since the research problem at hand is oriented towards the French perspective on the matter and since the object of investigation is Operation *Barkhane*, this study summarises available knowledge on the start and the continuation of the military intervention in the Sahel. As such, it also outlines the evolutions of its modalities during the timeline of interest: from the beginning of Operation Serval in January 2013, the transition to Operation *Barkhane* in August 2014, and up to the second announcement of its end in November 2022. Importantly, this timeline is also the one used to perform the study detailed thereafter.

Thus, and considering all the information given earlier, this investigation mainly aims to explain the French leadership’s decision to put an end to Operation *Barkhane* in 2022 despite unachieved objectives and persistent French interests in the Sahel.

3. Research question.

To elucidate the puzzling nature of such a choice, this investigation is conducted under the theoretical framework of the Prospect theory of Foreign Policy decision-making. This allows a better understanding of the sequence that led to this foreign policy choice: the one to end Operation *Barkhane* in 2022. Earlier, it was stated that this study builds on the hypothesis that the

long-term limitations of the French regional strategy applied to the conflict in the Sahel contributed to the decision to end Operation *Barkhane* in 2022. Process tracing is then used to determine the explanatory power of the hypothesis leading this study onto the research problem at hand: thanks to causal inference tests conducted on produced pieces of evidence. Hence, the research question this study answers is: *how did the aggregation of long-term limitations of the French regional strategy applied to the conflict in the Sahel impact the decision to end Operation Barkhane in 2022?*

The results of this investigation advance the understanding of the French intervention in the Sahel and the under-developed academic literature on the War on Terror in Western Africa, which had been ongoing since the early 2000s. Likewise, it makes an important contribution to Security Studies, more precisely to the scholarly discussion on interventions and foreign policy failures. In addition to its academic relevance, this study is important given the current (rapid) evolution of the geopolitical situation in the Sahel. The coups and the re-alignment of the Sahelian juntas towards Moscow have transformed the region into a new battleground for West-Russia competition. Understanding why Paris decided to end its military intervention would enable a better appreciation of that evolution. In addition, and as reminded in the introduction, the conflict has been deadlier in the last two years and the security situation on the ground has significantly worsened. As such, there is a need for further research on the conflict to provide viable solutions for this never-ending war that has already taken a heavy toll on the Sahelian populations' future.

To begin, the first part is dedicated to the literature review, providing an overview of the academic discussion on the French intervention in the Sahel and thereby bringing valuable information to understand the motivations and modalities of such an intervention. This first part is followed by a description of the theoretical framework used in this investigation – the prospect theory of foreign policy decision-making. The critique of this theoretical framework is here discussed. A third component is committed to the explanation of the methodology supporting this study, presenting the method of process tracing, how data is collected and how pieces of empirical

evidence are then tested. The findings are exhibited thereafter in a fourth part which concludes this paper by bringing forth paths for further research.

II. Literature review.

This literature review provides an in-depth survey of the academic discussion around the issue of the French intervention in the Sahel and the subsequent exit from the region. Moreover, although it focuses on academic work conducted on the limitations of the French intervention, and how they impacted its ability to achieve the desired effects and thus could have led to a withdrawal, this component also allows to a lesser extent the author to present the context of this intervention, both in Paris and in Western Africa, to better understand the events studied in this paper.

As an introduction to this section, it is important to note some specificities around the literature's nature and structure. While the media coverage of the French intervention in Western Africa has been fairly limited in the last ten years (apart from the 2020-2022 period marked by the military coups), academics have to the contrary produced a variety of studies related to the matter. Intriguingly, a substantial part of this literature comes from and is written by scholars from the English-speaking world. Most of the research has been concentrated on specific issues of the 10-year-long intervention. Since 2021 and the first coups in Mali and Burkina Faso, investigations have been conducted on the peculiar chronology of the intervention and have thus started to evaluate it in its entirety, bringing new elements to the academic debate on the subject. Yet, few have provided a comprehensive understanding of the aggregation of long-term elements, and their impacts on the outcome — the decision to end Operation *Barkhane*.

This literature review is divided into four sections. The first section (i) summarises the academic knowledge of the initial motivations and objectives of the French involvement in the Sahel since 2013, in light of the legacy of French interventions in Africa. The following sections zero in on the different limitations associated with the French intervention that would explain the exit from the Sahel, namely the inability to achieve tangible results on the ground (ii), the ineffectiveness of the “3D” strategy (iii), the drawbacks of the “Sahelisation” and “Europeanisation” initiatives (iv), and finally the irreconcilable interests of France and its Sahelian partners and the growing anti-French sentiment in the Sahel.

1. Context of the French involvement in the Sahel.

As mentioned earlier, this component also allows the author to present the context of this intervention in Paris and Western Africa to better understand the events studied in this paper. It introduces important elements that will improve the clarity of the study thereafter.

a. The French involvement in Western and Central Africa (1960s-2000s).

The French involvement in the Sahel cannot be realistically detached from its involvement in Western Africa as a whole. It thus invites us to take time to build a historical account of the contemporary Franco-African relationship. The starting point of this relationship can be found in the major political event of the second half of the 20th century in France – the advent of the Fifth French Republic. In May 1958, De Gaulle gained power amid an important political crisis, which takes its roots in the inability to win the Algerian War (Alexander & Keiger, 2013). Smith (2013) argues that faced with the cost of this colonial war and the rise of independentist movements across Western Africa, the French leadership realised the impossibility of maintaining control over this part of the continent through military might. Thus, the decolonisation and transition to independent states were planned and put into effect in the early 1960s; all Western and Central African French colonies were independent by 1964 (Smith, 2013).

This did not mean the end of the French presence in Africa. As explained by Bat (2012), as soon as the decolonisation efforts were planned, a new policy towards Africa was drafted by the French leadership. Efforts were made to keep the ‘singular relationship’ France had with its former colonies mainly through bilateral agreements with those on defence and economic matters (Bat, 2012). Deltombe & Picard (2021) show that this relationship was of the utmost significance for Paris: it offered a prestigious position in the international system as a favoured interlocutor between the West and Africa, but it also permitted France to be less dependent on the new European institutions and on the United States. Western and Central Africa were important markets for French exports and were exclusive domains for French construction as well as telecommunications companies (Deltombe & Picard, 2021; Bat, 2012). Those efforts were coordinated by a special office attached to the French presidency, the *cellule africaine* (African

Office) led by Jacques Foccart, which acted as the official counselling body for African matters (Bat, 2012).

Bat (2012) argued that to keep its influence and proximity with African leaders, Paris emphasized their survival (politically but also literally speaking) in exchange for the protection and support of French interests. The so-called *Pax Gallica* describes this political order, backed by the defence agreements authorizing French military intervention at the demand of those African leaders and by the subsequent installation of numerous French military bases across the continent (Bat, 2012; Vallin, 2015). As explained by Vallin (2015), from there on, France became the ‘Gendarme of Africa’, intervening on multiple occasions to provide a safety net to endangered African leaders. Deltombe & Picard (2021) explain that in addition to this strategy, the French leadership also sought other solutions that would entail covert and deniable options to protect its influence. Foccart thus organised and ran an informal network, known as the *Système Foccart* (Foccart System), which informally linked the French leadership as well as intelligence services with private companies, mercenaries and the African political elite, to achieve what could not be legally done by the French government (Bat, 2012; Deltombe & Picard, 2021).

As mentioned by Bat (2012) as well as Deltombe & Picard (2021), this political order was maintained during the 1970s and 1980s, prompting interventions in Zaïre, Mauritania, and Chad. Nonetheless, Vallin (2015) argues that the role of Paris as the Gendarme of Africa was heavily impacted by the Rwandan crisis and subsequent genocide. Paris had supported Kigali against Kagame’s rebels and proved unable to stop the massacres once they had started (Domergue, 1998; Vallin, 2015). Thus, alongside a significant reduction of its military capabilities on the continent, the French leadership progressively shifted its approach from unilateral towards multi-lateral interventions (Vallin, 2015). This shift came amid a new wave of criticism in the 1990s of the still-existing informal political alliance between French and African political elites infamously described by Verschave (1998): the so-called *Françafrique*. Vallin (2015) asserts that this shift was fully integrated by 2002 and the beginning of the First Ivorian Civil War, in which Paris rejected the demand for military backing emitted by then-Ivorian president Gbagbo (despite

the security agreement) and pursued a multilateral solution to restore peace in the country integrating UN and ECOWAS contribution. This points out the end of an era for the French foreign policy towards Africa (Vallin, 2015).

b. Chronic instability and insecurity in the Sahelian-Saharan Strip.

As explained earlier during the introduction, the French leadership (and French officials at large) make the distinction between Western Africa, Northern Africa, and the Sahelian-Saharan Strip, or *Bande Sahélo-Saharienne* (BSS) (Motte, 2018). The Sahelian-Saharan Strip englobes Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania and Burkina Faso, countries that mark the transition between North and West Africa, for a landmass greater than Western Europe (Motte, 2018). Harmon (2014), which includes Southern Algeria in its description of the strip, asserts that this region does not have much historical legacy to prove its existence over time and is more of an administrative denomination. Yet, Motte (2018) points out that there are important similarities between those states. Their borders do not represent the ethnic realities, thus there are important minorities in each of those countries, being from Northern Africa (Tuaregs and other Beber populations) or Western Africa (Mande, Songhai populations) (Motte, 2018, p. 122). In addition, populations from the Northern (arid) part of the strip are partially nomadic peoples, living on pastoral works, while the southern populations are in majority sedentary peoples, living from farming (Motte, 2018, p. 122). This has led to important ethnic tensions over territory issues on the demarcation line around the Niger River between nomadic and sedentary populations (Harmon, 2014).

The academic literature agrees on the chronic instability of the Sahelian-Saharan strip since the decolonisation in the early 1960s (Cooke & Sanderson, 2016; Harmon, 2014; Motte, 2018). The five Sahelian states have remained ‘fragile’ after multiple coups, interstate and intrastate wars in the region (Harmon, 2014; Motte, 2018). State ‘fragility’ is here understood as Osaghae (2007) described: unable to exercise jurisdiction within their borders, having both a limited level of governance and weak institutions, as well as enduring a legitimacy crisis. State ‘fragility’ also integrates the “pervasive corruption, poverty, and low levels of economic growth

and development” as characteristics of those states (Osaghae, 2007, p. 693). This ‘fragility’ has been reinforced by ethnic tensions outbursts, for example with the Tuareg rebellions in Mali and Niger in the 1990s, which take their roots in bad governance but also in the rarefication of water resources caused by important droughts since the 1980s (Cooke & Sanderson, 2016; Motte, 2018). Since most ethnic groups are present in multiple states and since the borders are porous, to say the least, most of those ethnic conflicts tend to ‘spill over’, leading to transnational insurgencies and reinforcing the different smuggling routes connecting the region to the rest of the continent (Cooke & Sanderson, 2016; Harmon, 2014; Motte, 2018).

According to Harmon (2014), the Sahelian states’ fragility, ethnic tensions and the “extreme contraband” existing in the border region between Algeria, Niger, Libya and Mali proved to be a perfect space for the development of Islamic violent extremist groups in the 2000s. The border region had been used by Algerian violent extremist groups during the Algerian Civil War in the 1990s and had cohabited and cooperated with the Tuaregs tribes there (Harmon, 2014, p. 144). Salafist and Wahabi groups had also started to be present in Northern Mali in the early 2000s (Harmon, 2014, p. 144; Thurston & Lebovich, 2013). In the late 2000s, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) started using the same region as a haven for its activities in Algeria, Niger and Mali, kidnapping European citizens in the whole region (Harmon, 2014, p. 162; Thurston & Lebovich, 2013). Yet, the academic literature identifies the end of Gaddafi's regime in 2011 as the starting point of the jihadist insurgency in the Sahel (Harmon, 2014; Motte, 2018; Pellerin, 2013). Pellerin (2013) argues that the insurgency was born from two distinct events. The first is the alliance between Ansar Dine, a Salafi Islamist group led by Iyad Ag Ghali (a former Tuareg rebel) and the MNLA, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, a Tuareg separatist group (Thurston & Lebovich, 2013; Pellerin, 2013). This alliance, which will start a vast offensive against the Malian army’s positions in the Northern part of the country in late 2011-early 2012, was helped in its task by the constant flow of weapons and ammunition from Libyan arsenals, which now laid open with the fall of Gaddafi’s regime (Motte, 2018; Pellerin, 2013). As

such, the Libyan Civil War was the match that set the already unstable region ablaze (Harmon, 2014; Pellerin, 2013).

c. Contemporary French interests in Africa.

All pieces of literature point out the importance of contemporary French interests in understanding the French intervention in the Sahel since 2013. Interestingly, today's French interests in Western Africa have not significantly evolved since the second half of the 20th century (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022). While economic interests are increasingly limited for Paris in the region, its political and diplomatic importance has been rising (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022; Prod'homme, 2023). To begin, the great diplomatic network France maintains in Western African states, the significant number of nationals living there, and inversely African diasporas installed in the *métropole* as well as the cultural/historical heritage made Paris an unavoidable actor in the region's matters (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022; Prod'homme, 2023). As such, it maintains its position as a favoured interlocutor between the 'Old Continent' and their African counterparts, mainly in discussions involving security (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022; Vallin, 2018; Antil & Vircoulon, 2024). In the last decades, Western Africa has become an important crossing point towards Europe for migrants, but also for drugs, arms and human trafficking networks. This proximity, along with the emergence of jihadist groups in the Sahel, has made the region a focal point for European security planning and has thus consecrated Paris's position as the main Western security actor on the African continent (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022; Prod'homme, 2023). Gaulme (2019) asserts that those interests are 'inherited' in that the succeeding French decision-makers must support this position, considered a burden by some, and a fine prize by others.

Gaulme (2019) argues that the French foreign policy towards Africa was built around three pillars to support this position and protect those interests. The first and most visible one is the military pillar: the French Armed Forces maintained important capabilities in bases around the continent, in Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Chad and Gabon, to react as fast as possible in case of

crisis threatening French interests, and to support French forces involved in international operations (Gaulme, 2019). Paris' interventions in the Ivorian Civil Wars are a good demonstration of the role military intervention plays in this pillar (Vallin, 2015). On that point, Vallin (2015) asserts that France remains a diminished yet still active 'gendarme' in Africa since the 1990s: between 1997 and 2001, Paris intervened 42 times on the continent through different sizes and types of actions (Vallin, 2015, p. 90).

The second pillar described by Gaulme (2019) is the monetary pillar based on the monetary guarantees France provides to numerous African states of the CFA zones. Thanks to guarantees made by the French Treasury, the money used in the CFA zones can be exchanged at fixed rates with euros, thus improving the economic stability of the zone and offering an important market for West and Central African exports (Balleix, 2010; Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022; Gaulme, 2019). It also permitted easier negotiations on help packages for the zone with the International Monetary Fund in the 1990s and 2000s (IMF) (Balleix, 2010). Yet it has received much criticism in the last decades. For Verschave (1998), the Franc CFA with its guaranteed convertibility has opened the way for the money laundering of ill-gotten gains on the continent, and as such is a central component in the influence peddling and corruption business of the 'Françafrique' system (Verschave, 1998, p. 74). Pigeaud & Sylla (2018) as well as Nubukpo (2015) point out that the CFA system forces African nations to depend on France for their monetary policies, thus preventing them from certain monetary tools that could open the way for further economic development.

The third and final pillar is the development pillar based on the public development aid programs France runs in Africa (Gaulme, 2019). Since the 1960s, France has been, like other Western nations, investing in the African economy through public aid programs (Balleix, 2010; Gaulme, 2019). The academic literature points out that the amount of aid (to the French GDP) has been shrinking constantly since the 1960s and thus cannot compare to other European nations' programs (Leboeuf & Quénot-Suarez, 2014; Prod'homme, 2023). Balleix (2010) also pointed out that the French public aid program has been since the 1990s partly 'Europeanised', meaning that

this aid is collectivised and thus is conditioned by the EU's priorities in terms of development aid. Hence, it can be understood from the literature that the development pillar has lost substantial capabilities over time (Balleix, 2010; Leboeuf & Quénot-Suarez, 2014; Prod'homme; 2023).

d. Motivations and objectives of the French intervention.

Bagayoko (2024) points out that the French military intervention in the Sahel should be divided into two different phases, with distinct strategies and objectives: the first one is Operation *Serval*, launched in 2013 and ended in 2014, the second and subsequent phase, with Operation *Barkhane*, launched in 2014 and extinct in 2022. The literature has a consensus on the motivations leading to Operation Serval. As explained earlier, conflict in Mali had started with the Tuareg rebellion and the 2012 Malian coup that had destabilised the country, yet the war had taken a dramatic turn with the proliferation of weapons from Kaddafi's arsenals (Pellerin, 2013). Charbonneau & Sears (2014a) explain that confronted with these two events, the French decision-makers had started to gather support for a multi-lateral operation in Mali, yet the recent fiasco in Libya had harmed this initiative in the West, thus limiting the support to such operation in European capitals.

Erforth (2020) points out that the option of a direct intervention of the French Armed Forces at scale was rejected by the French decision-makers at the beginning of 2012. Those had supported for years the idea of African ownership and multilateralism over security policy on the continent (Erforth, 2020, p. 85). Yet, because the jihadist insurgency had the potential to transform this crisis into a regional conflict, it was assessed by French leadership as a direct threat to French interests in the region and was thus the top priority for Paris (Henke, 2017, p. 314; Erforth, 2020). This argument is directly linked to elements provided earlier: in the Sahel and the rest of Africa, the states' fragility and porous borders tend to increase the risk of spillover from localised conflicts (Cooke & Sanderson, 2016; Harmon, 2014; Motte, 2018). It is also important to note here that by June 2012, the alliance between the Tuareg nationalists of the MNLA and the jihadist groups had failed, and the two sides were in open conflict (Thurston & Lebovich, 2013). The

second option to deal with the Malian crisis in 2012 was a multi-lateral intervention of the ECOWAS (Henke, 2017, p. 315). Henke (2017) asserts that this option was also rejected, as the French leadership had doubts about the capabilities of the ECOWAS forces and the Defence Ministry would have eventually preferred to work unilaterally. Thus, by October 2012, the French Armed Forces started drafting the plan for a unilateral operation and the French leadership began mobilising public opinion on the issue (Henke, 2017, p.316; Erforth, 2020).

In January 2013, the jihadist elements in Northern Mali started their offensive on Bamako, which immediately prompted the call for help from the Malian presidency and thus the beginning of the intervention [Operation *Serval*] (Henke, 2017; Valin, 2015). As shown by Goffi (2017), the objectives of the initial operation were clearly defined: stopping the jihadist offensive, securing Bamako from further rebel advances, and helping Mali recover its territorial integrity. *Serval* was built as a purely military operation, whose objectives were swiftly achieved by the French Armed Forces, in a few months and at a limited cost (Goffi, 2017; Shurkin, 2014). Yet, the jihadist threat was not eliminated by Operation *Serval*, as some groups had managed to escape from Mali into Niger and Algeria, and as such Paris was forced to rethink its intervention in the Sahel (Goffi, 2017).

Suarez & Lebœuf (2014) point out that after the tactical success of *Serval*, Paris had been looking for a way to handle the crisis in the Sahel in the long term. As such, the French leadership applied a mixed civil-military strategy, prescribed by the *Livre Blanc de la Défense et de la Sécurité Nationale* (White Book of the Defence and National Security) of 2008, a document ordered by the presidency, built to guide French national security and crisis-management endeavours (Suarez & Leboeuf; 2014). This strategy, called the *approche globale* (global approach), was organised around the '3 Ds': defence, diplomacy, and development. Paris needed to use those three elements in coordination through inter-ministry policymaking to deal with the security crisis in the Sahel (Suarez & Leboeuf; 2014).

To comply with this approach, the literature points out that the defence element was revised through the re-organisation of Operation *Serval* into Operation *Barkhane* in August 2014.

It is important to note here that the defence element remains the most important element of this new approach (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022). The military operation was organised as a counter-terrorism operation and had as its main objective to « put pressure » on the jihadist groups and as such « to give time to the Sahelian partners » (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022, p. 26). Time to form the Sahelian armed forces to task ahead first, but also time to tackle the inherent and profound causes of the security crisis in the Sahel through state and governance reforms, as well as social and economic initiatives (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022). Vallin (2015) asserts that the scope of the operation was enlarged to the 5 states of the Sahelian-Saharan Strip, and a specific agreement to reinforce security cooperation between those states was made under the name of G5 Sahel. In all, those are 3 to 4 thousand French soldiers that are mobilised in the Sahel, alongside their supporting assets (Goffi, 2017; Vallin, 2015). Under the diplomatic element of the *approche globale*, Paris also fostered the support of the European Union and the United States (Goffi, 2017). In addition to the AFISMA, ECOWAS' initiative to support Mali, other actors were also integrated into the security landscape, with the deployment of the MINUSMA from the UN, EUTM and EUCAP Mali/Sahel from the EU (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022; Gaulme, 2019). Finally, under the development element, Gaulme (2019) asserts that the cooperation between the French Armed Forces and the French Office of Foreign Assistance (or AFD, *Aide Française au Développement*) is reinforced while this assistance is set to increase in size in the coming years, particularly for the Sahel.

2. Inability to achieve long-lasting strategic success on the ground.

The literature describes numerous long-lasting limitations of the French intervention in the Sahel. A first element which had been pointed out by numerous scholars, relative to Operation *Barkhane* and the French strategy in the region, is the inability to achieve enduring strategic success on the ground (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022; Bertrand, Chafer & Stoddard, 2023; Galois, 2022; Goffi, 2017; Guichaoua, 2020; Prod'homme, 2023). This argument is understood considering the objectives of Operation *Barkhane*: to « put pressure » on the jihadist groups and

as such « to give time to the Sahelian partners » (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022, p. 26). The literature agrees on the point that the French Armed Forces achieved multiple tactical successes against the different jihadist groups (commonly referred to as GAT, *Groupe Armé Terroriste* or Armed Terrorist Group), yet those were achieved at a localised level and did little to improve security for the local populations through time (Goffi, 2017; Michailof, 2018). Importantly, Galois (2022) shows that Operation *Barkhane* failed to prevent the spreading of those groups throughout the Sahel. In addition, while precision strikes had indeed eliminated high-ranking members of the jihadist groups, there is no proof that those organisations did not enlarge their ranks during the 2015-2022 period (Galois, 2022).

Scholars gave several reasons for this failure. The first is the lack of capabilities to achieve such complicated objectives (Galois, 2022; Goffi, 2017; Prod'homme, 2023). With an area of operation, the size of half of Western Europe, the 4000-soldiers-strong French element was overstretched, even with the most modern capabilities such as drones, aeroplanes and helicopters (Goffi, 2017; Prod'homme, 2023). As shown by Goffi (2017), the French military leadership was aware of those limitations and pointed out that it would slow progress on the ground to a dramatic extent. Vallin (2015) pointed out that while the French military was already overstretched by 2014, the new law on the budget of the Armed Forces had planned for the further reduction of enlisted personnel for the 2014-2019 period, meaning that the manpower available for the operation was also reduced during the intervention.

In the case of Mali, the second reason is the MINUSMA and Sahelian armies' inability to take on the fight after those tactical successes (Michailof, 2018). The objective of Operation *Barkhane* was to support the return of the Sahelian states' control over 'liberated territories' (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022). Michailof shows that in the case of Mali, those forces were unable to do so despite important support from international backers, pointing out the general "inefficiency of the Malian Army" (Michailof, 2018, p. 51). To explain this, Michailof (2018) argues that as the Malian Armed Forces are extensively corrupt, the support provided ended up financing or helping high-ranking officers in the army to improve their political and private

situation. As such, in the Sahel, training and support programs proposed by the international backers are also considered inefficient (Michailof, 2018). Vircoulon (2017) argues that in the case of the MINUSMA, the inability to provide long-lasting security and stability has more to do with the mandate given by the UN. Indeed, the MINUSMA does not have the means (capabilities), the ways (doctrines) or proper ends (goal) to deal with a sizable jihadist insurgency, as most of the mandate was re-used from older peacekeeping and peace-building operations, leading to numerous casualties (Vircoulon, 2017).

The literature presents a military quagmire in the Sahel, in which the French Armed Forces are unable to eliminate the threat posed by the jihadist groups, nor to limit their expansion to other zones of operation. Michailof (2018) argues that the French forces have significant experience and functioning strategies for counterinsurgency, with the so-called '*Stratégie de la tâche d'huile*', or oil-spot strategy, which had worked in Algeria and Afghanistan. Yet, it requires an important number of soldiers, which Operation *Barkhane* never had, to control large spans of territory, as well as functioning administrative and security services to follow the progress of those troops, which the MINUSMA and Sahelian nations could never offer (Michailof, 2018). Hence, while the forces embedded in Operation *Barkhane* would achieve numerous tactical successes, the security situation would only improve for a few months before prompting new actions against the resourceful insurgency regaining control. To sum up, overstretched and with no hope for improvement, the French Armed Forces were bogged down in a war without end (Galois, 2022).

3. The ineffectiveness of the “3D” strategy

Like Goffi (2017), Guichaoua (2020) asserts that the French leadership knew the limits of a purely military operation in the Sahel. As such, and following the *Livre Blanc* of 2008, Paris pushed for a “bureaucratic war effort” under the frame of inter-ministry cooperation – the *approche globale* or the ‘3D’ (Guichaoua, 2020, p. 907). Guichaoua (2020) points out that the

different ministries took this ‘war effort’ seriously, working continuously and relentlessly to improve the situation for populations on the ground, making significant progress towards winning the ‘hearts and minds’ battle. Still, those efforts are coordinated from Paris and as a result comport reduced ownership for the Sahelian states, often leading to issues with Sahelian authorities on certain choices, such as cooperating with local non-state authorities (Guichaoua, 2020).

Charbonneau (2019) argued that, from the start, Operation *Barkhane*’s focus on fighting terrorism left little space for the other elements of the *approche globale*, as it diverted much of the efforts towards the ‘jihadist problem’ rather than the root causes of the insurgencies in the Sahel. Charbonneau (2019) pointed out that the primacy of the fight against terrorism adopted by Paris enabled the Sahelian states to disregard the questions of development, state-building, or inter-community relationships, leading to further grievances and increasing difficulties for the French strategy in the Sahel. Like Charbonneau (2019), Goffi (2017) and Prod’homme (2023) point out that, in terms of scale, the development element of the *approche globale* remained in the background compared to the secondary element. Prod’homme (2023) asserts that even if improvements were made, the overall support remains reduced compared to the support provided in the second half of the 20th century in terms of allocated funds and clerks. Goffi (2017) shows that the allocated funds to the Sahel are significantly lower than what was allocated to the rest of the world, or even more problematically, to the rest of Africa. Gaulme (2019) supports that argument, showing that while there were improvements to the structure of the French initiative towards development in the Sahel, budgetarily speaking, the evolution is limited. Sahelian states, due to their fragility, have little borrowing capacity, and as such the support takes the form of donations, limiting greatly the amounts Paris can provide (Gaulme, 2019). Antil & Vircoulon (2024) asserts in opposition to those arguments that they were sufficient international backers, yet this aid was hijacked by the Sahelian governing elites, leading to the exasperation of those same international backers.

The diplomatic element of the *approche globale* also suffered some limitations. The regionalisation of the problem at hand failed to integrate some of the influential actors in the

region, as the ‘G5 Sahel’ was built without Algeria and Senegal (Gaulme, 2019). To support the argument made by Charbonneau (2019), Chafer & al (2020) draw the same conclusion for the ‘G5 Sahel’ initiative, which had seen its *raison d’être* shift from security and development to overwhelming security in 2016. On the point of coalition building and cooperation, Chafer & al (2020) assert that the need for multilateralism prescribed by the *approche globale* came to materialise because it enabled French decision-makers to legitimise its action on the continent and to share part of the burden linked to its intervention. Nonetheless, Tardy (2020) argues that whenever multilateralism fails to produce expected results, Paris shifts back to unilateral actions, as was the case in the Sahel when the EU’s contribution to the effort was deemed insufficient. In the case of the EU, Erforth (2020) explains that while Paris has made great progress since the 1980s in its approach to interventions in Africa, French decision-makers doubt the possibility of a strong European actor in the Sahel, and hence have continuously used both unilateralism and multilateralism to resolve the crisis at hand. In essence, by promoting multilateralism while keeping the main role in this coalition, Paris is reinforcing its position as a major power and an unavoidable actor in the region (Erforth, 2020). Chafer & al (2020) support that last argument by showing that Paris protects the idea of the ‘French exception’, retaining part of its unilateral approach while operating with other actors, for example with independent operational command.

4. Drawbacks of the ‘Sahelisation’ and ‘Europeanisation’ initiatives.

As said earlier, and as recalled by Chafer & al (2020), prolonged unilateral actions were considered impossible after the 1990s by the French leadership based on a simple realisation: the lack of resources made unilateral interventions unsustainable in the long run. The literature points out that sharing the burden of the intervention thus became a priority after the start of Operation *Barkhane* (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022; Chafer & al, 2020; Erforth, 2020). The two principal elements of this initiative are the ‘Sahelisation’ and ‘Europeanisation’ process, by which Paris sought to reduce its implication in the conflict while achieving the objectives defined in 2014 (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022).

The ‘Sahelisation’ process, firstly, was centred around the creation of the G5-Sahel organisation, an agreement between Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad and Niger to increase cooperation between the five Sahelian states, on matters of security and development (Desgrais, 2019). As explained by Desgrais (2019), this structure suffered from the beginning from important difficulties, mainly a significantly complex organisation, financing issues, and poor overall coordination between the members. Like other scholars, Desgrais (2019) shows that the coordination shifted from security and development to exclusively security in 2016-2017, thus reducing the construction of the so-called ‘security-development nexus’. The reason given for this shift is simply that the proposed investment projects did not receive enough funding from international backers to the contrary of the Joint Task Force project, which did receive after significant time enough financial backing to be engaged on the battlefield (Desgrais, 2019; Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022).

Bansept & Tenenbaum (2022) explained that the Joint Task Force was not particularly efficient, as it combined the limitations of the Sahelian armed forces and the constraints of joint operations in the Sahelian setting: “[...] Organisational inertia, coordination issues and defiance between neighbours” (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022, p. 29). According to Galois (2022), the French Armed Forces did try to resolve some of those issues, with the deployment of small support elements integrated into the Sahelian forces, but they were also constrained in their task by several elements. This method could recall the colonial army’s system and while it could enable tactical success in the short term, it would “comfort the structural weaknesses” of the Sahelian forces in the long run, in contradiction with the French strategy in the Sahel (Galois, 2022, p. 6).

Galois (2022) recalls that the ‘Sahelisation’ process was undermined by another major weakness of the Sahelian armies: their exactions against civilian populations. Nigerian and Malian soldiers had committed numerous atrocities against civilians during the conflict, most of the time undoing the efforts made by the French Armed Forces in their fight for the ‘hearts and minds’ of the populations (Galois, 2022). The French Army is not exempt from blame, as it did side on various occasions with non-state militias known for their exactions in the ethnic conflicts

presented earlier (Galois, 2022). The event of Bounti in January 2021, in which several civilians were killed in a French airstrike, a fact that was then denied by the French command, did nothing to improve that aspect (Galois, 2022).

As shown by Erforth (2020), the ‘Europeanisation’ process was part of the French strategy from the start. As soon as 2012, the French leadership mobilised its European partners to support the intervention, not as a fighting force but rather as a provider of training for the Malian forces (Erforth, 2020). Hence, just a few days after the start of Operation *Serval*, the EU launched the training mission in Mali (EUTM Mali), which remains the most important European training mission in the Sahel, with 14,000 soldiers trained by 2020 (Erforth 2020). Other missions were launched by EU member-states, for example in Niger with Belgian and German training programs (Wilén, 2021). Those programs were aimed at re-constructing the Sahelian armed forces, to fight the jihadist insurgencies and to replace in the long run the French Armed Forces in the region (Erforth, 2020). Bansept & Tenenbaum (2022) add that the ‘Europeanisation’ also encompassed British logistical support (with aerial heavy-lifting capabilities) and the Task Force Takuba, integrated into the French command and composed of special forces to support the Sahelian counter-terrorism efforts.

Marsh & Rolandsen (2020) argue that in the Malian case, the great number of training programs provided proved detrimental to the cohesion of the Malian security forces, fragmenting it and thus reducing civilian control over security forces. Like Marsh & Rolandsen (2020), Moe (2020) points out that the different programs were intended to build different capabilities: peacekeeping and peacebuilding, and counterterrorism. Accordingly, having forces trained for one purpose and not the other has proved detrimental to the protection of civilians in Mali due to the complexity of the conflict (Moe, 2020). Tull (2019) suggests that the training programs revealed important tensions between Mali and its European partners due to different visions and expectations over the content and conditions of those programs. Perceiving a reduction of its sovereignty, Malian decision-makers proved uncooperative on numerous occasions, reducing the programs' effectiveness (Tull, 2019). In the meantime, the Malian Armed Forces also criticised

EUTM Mali, implying that it did little to improve its capabilities to fight against the jihadist groups (Tull, 2019). Moreover, and as asserted by Moe (2020), despite those training efforts, several trained elements of the Malian Armed Forces ended up committing atrocities against civilians, even before the irruption of Wagner in 2021. Finally, Michailof (2018) argues that the failure of the training missions and the reluctance to provide the Malian army with costly equipment condemned the French Armed Forces to a war without end, as no Malian forces would ever be able to bring the same capabilities to fight the jihadist groups as the French army.

5. The irreconcilable interests of France and its Sahelian partners and the growing anti-French sentiment in the Sahel.

An important element described by the literature to explain the limitations of the French intervention, and which will come to take a part in the downfall of Operation *Barkhane* is the irreconcilable interests of France and the Sahelian regimes. The emergence of anti-French sentiment in the Sahel is also discussed in this section.

In the case of Mali and as shown by Charbonneau (2019), a first point of contention can be found in the identification of the ‘terrorist threat’ on the ground. Malian officials tend to consider Tuareg nationalist groups (such as the MNLA) and jihadist groups as the same organisations, labelled as terrorist groups, despite the signature of the 2015 Alger Accord between Bamako and the Tuareg groups (Charbonneau, 2019). Galois (2022) explains that, as the Malian Army proved unable to capture the Northern capital of Kidal from the Tuareg nationalist groups in 2014, Paris had pushed for negotiations, in which Bamako lost control over much of Northern Mali. The French decision to push for negotiation was heavily criticized by Malian officials and populations alike, who considered this a clear attack on Malian sovereignty (Galois, 2022). The perception of an attack on Malian sovereignty by Malian officials is also acknowledged by Tull (2019), who explains that Bamako had been increasingly reluctant to accept the conditions of international interventions in training and operational support. On that same point, Bansept & Tenenbaum (2022) assert that in search of reliable local partners on the ground, Paris had

cooperated successively with Tuareg militias, northern pro-government militias (known as *la Plateforme* [the platform] militias) and then had put emphasis in working more closely with the FAMa. Those reversals and swift changes negatively impacted the relationship between Bamako and Paris, who was in consequence perceived as an unreliable partner by Malian officials (Bansept & Tenenbaum, 2022, p. 28)

A second point of opposition between Malian and French officials has been the possibility of discussion on peace with the jihadist groups (Galois, 2022). While Malian officials and members of jihadist groups such as Iyad Ag Ghali had sent clear signals that they were willing to open negotiations, French officials had put their ‘veto’ on such discussions, conditioning the French presence on the basis that no negotiations with jihadist groups would take place (Galois, 2022, p. 3). As explained by Guichaoua & Pellerin (2017), numerous openings were made by part of the Malian political landscape towards jihadist groups, yet the fact that their leaders were “high-value targets for the French Armed Forces” would simply neutralise any peace initiative in Mali (Guichaoua & Pellerin, 2017, p. 206). Charbonneau & al. (2021) assert that small-scale peace agreements were signed between local authorities and jihadist groups in the Sahel, yet those were limited by the external pressure from larger actors. Bakayoko (2019) explains that Paris’ willingness to negotiate with Tuareg nationalists and not with the jihadist groups has only enabled the partial resolution of the conflict in the north of Mali, but not in the south of the country nor Niger and Burkina Faso.

A third point of tension can be found in the operational choices of the French army as the conflict displaced itself towards the south. As Charbonneau & al (2021) recall, the conflict in the so-called *zone des trois frontières* (zone of the three borders, between Niger, Mali and Burkina-Faso) is fuelled by inter-ethnic grievances, and as such has evolved towards a multi-layered opposition between the Malian state, local auto-defence militias aligned to the Malian state, ethnic militias and finally the jihadist groups. Antil & Vircoulon (2024) point out that this complex environment was an important indicator of the tensions between Bamako and Paris, as the French forces made the choice not to implicate themselves in the region’s fighting and concentrated solely

on the struggle against jihadist groups. Yet, the support the French Army provided to the FAMa, which was involved in numerous crimes against local populations and had no intention to solve the problem politically, damaged the confidence of those same populations and thus further complicated the task of preventing the extension of the jihadist insurgencies in the region (Charbonneau & al; 2021).

Throughout this literature review, the problem of the legitimacy and efficiency of the Sahelian state has been continuously mentioned. To summarize this relationship, Antil & Vircoulon (2024) claim that the nature of the Sahelian regimes supported by Paris was the root cause of the conflicts. Galois (2022) backs that same argument, postulating that the presence of the French forces guaranteed the continuation of the poor practices of the Sahelian regimes, tolerating bad governance, endemic corruption, and foreign aid embezzlement, thus giving material to the unrest in the region. Paris did so willingly, betting on stability rather than on political reform, and supporting unelected governments (Galois, 2022; Antil & Vircoulon, 2024). Charbonneau & al (2021) recall that the stabilisation process, based on the expansion of the coercive capabilities of dubious regimes, proved to have a destabilizing effect, with numerous military coups during the 10-year-long intervention. Gazeley (2022) adds on that same point that the coercive emphasis made on the perceived weakness of the Malian state was detrimental to civilian control over the military, reduced the probability of needed political reform, and aggravated many of the grievances that had led to the initial conflict.

The anti-French sentiment is another element of the growing tensions between Sahelian states and Paris. Guichaoua (2020) argues that in 2019, ‘fake news’ on French military operations became extremely common and reached a great audience. Those included allegations of theft by French forces in Mali, the existence of a hidden agenda in the Sahel to steal resources, or the collusion of jihadist groups with the French army (Guichaoua, 2020, p. 900). Vircoulon, Antil, and Giovalucchi (2023) assert that the use of the ‘French conspiracy’ in Western Africa is not a new phenomenon and has been utilised “as a political resource” by failing African political elites (Vircoulon, Antil, and Giovalucchi, 2023, p. 21). Most of the time, the ‘French conspiracy’ was

centred around its military presence and interventionism or Paris' control over the Franc CFA, which are important elements of the concept of *Françafrique* (Vircoulon, Antil, and Giovalucchi, 2023). In the Sahel, the idea of a 'French conspiracy' found its way both for the regimes and their political opponents. While Guichaoua (2020) points out that members of Burkina Faso's government and Mali's parliament publicly denounced such conspiracy, Vircoulon, Antil, and Giovalucchi (2023) show that opposition groups in Mali were also heavily invested in the proliferation of those ideas. Finally, to the great anger of Paris, the Sahelian government did nothing to counter those narratives, leading to a new high in tensions in the coalition (Guichaoua, 2020, p. 901).

III. Analytical Framework.

1. Foreign Policy Analysis.

In the realm of International Relations and Security Studies, one of the main points of interest is how states act externally and how they interact with other actors. Foreign Policy Analysis, or FPA, concentrates on studying those actions and interactions, more precisely on how actors build and manage their foreign policy (Morin & Paquin, 2018). Compared with the classic international studies, while the former focuses on the behaviour of actors and the reasons behind such behaviour in the international system, FPA concentrates on the decision-making process regarding external relations at a given time (Morin & Paquin, 2018). Hence, it can be considered a sub-field of International Relations, within and informed by this discipline (Alden & Aran, 2012). As explained by Alden & Aran (2012), a main point of divergence between this discipline and its sub-field of research can be found in the opposition between structural constraints on the actors and their agency: International relations tend to concentrate on how actors act under the structural constraints of the international system, while FPA gives attention to the subjectivity and agency of the actors as well as the impact such agency can have on the decision-making process (Alden & Aran, 2012, p. 4). Another distinction between International Relations and FPA can be found in the level of analysis. Building on Waltz's argument on the importance of the level of analysis, Morin & Paquin (2018) explain that FPA is conducted at the individual and national level of analysis, while works in International Relations are generally carried on at the international system level. While FPA has received important critiques since the end of the Cold War, particularly on its inability to adapt to the changing nature of the state and foreign policy, the field has been in constant evolution and has extended dramatically to incorporate new elements that could help explain how states build and conduct their external relations (Garrison, 2003).

In the next two sections, the FPA's analytical framework is broken down to better understand how FPA's investigations work. In FPA, the foreign policy process is understood as the junction of five important components: goals, resources, and instruments of the policy, then the process of decision-making and outcomes of the policy (Morin & Paquin, 2018). First, the

goals of a foreign policy are what the actors aim to achieve, there can be multiple objectives, even opposite to one another in some situations, and can evolve through time (Morin & Paquin, 2018, p. 19). Paquin & Beauregard (2015) note the same aspect that those goals, called ‘announced goals’, can be deduced from public documents emitted by the actor. Those goals must be justified, with a particular ‘doctrine’ or with the ‘national interest’, a notion that can be easily deformed to legitimise the action of an actor (Morin & Paquin, 2018, p. 22). The second element is the resources one actor can mobilise to conduct its foreign policy (Morin & Paquin, 2018, p. 27). Resources are here understood in a particular way, not only as power in its classical interpretation but rather as capacities based on the resources of financial, diplomatic or military nature an actor can extract and mobilise to form capabilities (Morin & Paquin, 2018, p. 30). The ability to extract and mobilise resources to build capabilities, and then transform those capabilities into foreign policy tools is also constrained by the nature of the actor, its political system, and its priorities (Morin & Paquin, 2018, p. 31). The third element is the instruments, which vary in terms of intensiveness and coerciveness, in other words “from soft to hard power”, and includes, between others, socialization, coercion, subversion and intervention (Morin & Paquin, 2018, p. 32). The informed reader will here see the proximity of this conceptualization of foreign policy to the ‘ends-ways-means’ conceptualisation of military strategy.

Since the actors do not function in the same way, multiple visions of how the decision-making process takes place have emerged throughout the history of FPA (Morin & Paquin, 2018). Indeed, the decision-making process is one of the main points of interest for FPA studies (Alden & Aran, 2012, p. 21) Most of the literature agree on a certain process, which is divided into six phases: framing the problem at stake (1), placement in the agenda (2), formation and evaluation of the options (3), decision on one of the options available (4), implementation of the chosen option (5), evaluation of the outcome (6) (Morin & Paquin, 2018). This process is repeated after the evaluation, but with a different framing of the issue at stake due to new information or the evolution of the situation, thus leading to a spiralling process rather than a perfect cyclical one (Morin & Paquin, 2018; Dreyer, 2010). According to Alden & Aran (2012), the evaluation of

foreign policy has received less attention than the study of the decision-making process. Still, it consists mainly of measuring, through the concept of positive and negative feedback, and explaining the impact of a foreign policy (Morin & Paquin, 2018).

2. Prospect theory of foreign policy decision-making.

This study utilizes the theoretical guidance of the prospect theory of foreign policy decision-making. Prospect theory is part of the rational approach to foreign policy decision-making, an adaptation of the Rational Choice Theory of economics and social behaviour, to explain how actors make foreign policy choices (Morin & Paquin, 2018). The basic presuppositions of this approach are that states are unitary actors, and they act rationally, or rather purposefully, meaning that they act to achieve their goals (Dougherty, 2013). Allison (1971) explains that states under constraints, considering the national interest act in a value-maximising manner, meaning that they pick the best alternative out of the proposed options in terms of expected utility for the state. This is the so-called Rational Actor Model (RAM) of foreign policy decision-making. The rational approach was fairly popular in the post-WWII period, as it shares multiple elements with the realist paradigm of International Relations, yet significant critiques were made on its model of foreign policy decision-making, as it lacks an understanding of how risks, lack of accurate intelligence, or failure to perceive some elements of the problem may impact the rationale, utility-maximising process described by the model (Alden & Aran, 2012, p. 25; Dougherty, 2013, p. 19).

Prospect theory emerged partly as an answer to this critique (Dougherty, 2013). Like the Rational Actor Model, the theory and its components were imported from other disciplines: economics and psychology (Morin & Paquin, 2018, p. 237). The prospect theory brings a behaviourist (study of human behaviour) approach to FPA and “theorises individual decision-making under risk” (Marandici, 2022, p. 3; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). In the words of Marandici (2022), leaders perceive the *status quo* regarding the point of reference, the situation is in the domain of loss if there is an improvement compared to the point of reference, it is in the

domain of loss if there is a worsening compared to that same point (Marandici, 2022, p. 4). As explained by McDermott (2001), prospect theory asserts that taking into account the domain in which the situation stands (considering the reference point), individuals tend to be more cautious when they are at a gain, and to take more risks when they are at a loss. ‘Loss aversion’ is the fact that individuals and as such decision-makers have a “pronounced aversion to loss”, and as such it entails that they are more preoccupied with limiting losses than with increasing their gains considering the reference point (Dougherty, 2013, p. 20). ‘Reference dependence’ is the fact domain’s perception is linked to a certain point of reference (Marandici, 2022, p. 5). As pointed out by Alden & Aran (2012), in prospect theory, the decision-making process is still guided by rationality, yet the perception of the setting and point of reference “introduces subjectivity in the assessment” and thus in the next phases of the process (Alden & Aran, 2012, p. 29).

Besides introducing the situational and loss aversion element to the rational approach to foreign policy decision-making, prospect theory brings other implications. As shown by Marandici (2022), the individual preferences in terms of choices of the decision-maker, or groups of decision-makers, are also influenced by the framing of the situation (McDermott, 2001). In the words of Dougherty (2013), “the same situation can be understood [framed] as either an opportunity to gain or a chance to avoid loss” (Dougherty, 2013, p. 27). Decision-makers also tend to be less sensitive to the loss and gains further as the situation moves from the point of reference, they also tend to “overweight low probabilities” and “underestimate high probabilities” in terms of outcome, as high probabilities are considered certainties (Marandici, 2023, p. 4). This has implications for the perception of options considering the settings and the point of reference, the certainty of achieving gains invites risk-taking behaviour, while the certainty of attaining loss invites cautious behaviour (McDermott, 2001; Simon, 2015, p. 7). Domestic politics are also noted to have a distinct impact on the preferences of decision-makers (Simon, 2015, p. 8).

Prospect theory helps in the understanding of how foreign policy changes take place. Welch (2005) provides multiple implications prospect theory brings on that element. Decision-makers are more likely to enact change in foreign policy when they “perceive their situation to be

in the domain of loss”, even more so when decision-makers assess that their policies are responsible for that situation (Welch, 2005, p. 49). Foreign policy change is more likely if the continuation of the previous policy brings the certainty of more losses than gains (Welch, 2005, p. 46). In addition, if there are options available that have a higher chance of improving the situation, policy change is most likely, to the same extent that change in foreign policy is expected to occur when the decision-makers can secure minimal gains or cut minimal losses (Welch, 2005, p. 49). Welch (2005) also brings forth information that will help the operationalization process in this study. As explained earlier, the theoretical tenants of the prospect theory can be applied to groups of decision-makers. Most democracies present one central decision-maker and secondary influential decision-makers to make foreign policy decisions. As such, knowledge of the structure of that group, who is making the final decision, and who are the significant secondary decision-makers can help understand how the situation was framed, the preferences of the actors and hence what were the proposed options when policy change seemed inevitable (Welch, 2005, p. 49). Furthermore, Welch (2005) points out that statements by officials of the state reports emitted before the policy change can inform us about the “overall preferences and risk-taking propensities of the group as a whole” (Welch, 2005, p. 49). Keeping in mind the process of foreign policy decision-making described in the FPA component, the prospect theory has the following implications for the different steps of foreign policy decision-making:

- 1- Framing the problem at stake – Perception of the situation in the domain of losses or gain, in comparison to the reference point, in multiple dimensions.
- 2- Agenda setting – Decision-makers are more likely to enact change in foreign policy when they perceive their situation to be in the domain of loss. Foreign policy change is more likely if the continuation of the previous policy brings the certainty of more losses than gains.

- 3- Formation and evaluation of the available options – the certainty of achieving gains invites risk-taking behaviour, while the certainty of attaining loss invites cautious behaviour.
- 4- Decision on one of the options available – foreign policy change is expected when decision-makers can secure minimal gains or cut minimal losses.
- 5- Implementation of the chosen option.

This study thus analyses the changes in the perceived French situation in the Sahel as a consequence of the limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel. In addition, sequencing enables us to look at a particular phase in time that corresponds to a particular step in the decision-making process that led to policy change.

3. Critique and Limitations of the Prospect Theory.

Significant criticism was emitted towards prospect theory. This component presents the major points of criticism, the limitations, and the answers made by scholars to counter those arguments. The first point is that, as most of the theoretical elements of prospect theory were established in other disciplines and under laboratory conditions, scholars have emitted doubts about the applicability of such theoretical elements to foreign policy analysis (Morin & Paquin, 2018, p. 247). Accordingly, the realities of international relations and foreign policy decision-making are complex: the variety of options, the risk associated with each option and the psychological impact of losses and gains at such a scale can barely be reproduced in laboratory experiments (Levy, 1992; Morin & Paquin, 2018, p. 247). To illustrate this point, the loss aversion's impact on individuals may not be the same when the loss in question is about human

lives and not small amounts of money (the loss of small amounts of money is the most used example for the explanation of the loss aversion phenomenon).

The second point is that prospect theory lacks a proper understanding of how framing works, meaning that there is no theory of framing formation (McDermott, 2004, p. 304). Thanks to previous empirically based studies, it is assumed that “historical analogies, norms, habits and expectations” have an important impact on how framing takes place (Simon, p. 8). Previous foreign policy failure for example is assumed to have an impact on situational framing, as was the case for example with the US reluctance to intervene in other crises after the defeat in Vietnam in the late 1970s (McDermott, 2004, p. 304). While the lack of a theory of framing has been truly detrimental in predictive research, it does not undermine as much the explanatory power of the prospect theory, as the framing still is observable, as decision-makers leave clues on the framing process in statements, reports and other official documents (Welch, 2005, p. 49). A third point is the lack of understanding the theory brings regarding emotion, even as it is known that it can influence decision-making (McDermott, 2004, p. 306). In prospect theory, emotion could impact how decision-makers experience an outcome, opening the way to a better comprehension of how decision-makers experience a decision (McDermott, 2004, p. 306). Integrating emotions into prospect theory would contradict the assumed centrality of utility in decision-making, and thus provide scholars with a better apprehension of other, still inexplicable events (McDermott, 2004, p. 306).

Basic components of the prospect theory’s application to foreign policy decision-making also needed clarification. It theorises individual decision-making under risk, yet how should risk be apprehended? While early studies understood risk as a “synonym to dangerous [...], as expected consequences”, risk in prospect theory should on the contrary be considered as “risk as outcome uncertainty” (Vis & Kuijpers, 2018, p. 577). Another component that needed clarification was the reference point and, more importantly, the question of how to indicate the reference point (Vis & Kuijpers, 2018). This question is most challenging because decision-makers often act in multiple ‘dimensions’, for example in domestic politics and the international

sphere, and as such may experience an outcome differently in the separate spheres (Vis & Kuijpers, 2018). The answer given to that limitation is that decision-makers proceed to multi-dimensional trade-offs, meaning that they can put more emphasis on one dimension to the detriment of the other. This also implies that domestic politics are indeed important in the understanding of foreign-policy decision-making under the prospect theory.

Finally, characteristics of the prospect theory concerning some of its effects were also rediscussed and their apprehension improved. The type of domain, in which the situation is framed, proved to have implications on the effects described by the theory (Vis & Kuijpers, 2018). Framing a domain in terms of human lives or terms of monetary considerations impacts the sensitivity of the decision-makers differently when they are considering available options (Vis & Kuijpers, 2018, p. 581). When there is a lack of accurate information on a particular situation, the framing of that situation impacts the perception of their domain in comparison to the reference point (Vis & Kuijpers, 2018, p. 581). Interestingly, if decision-makers are accountable for their actions, they are less risk-averse than was previously thought (Vis & Kuijpers, 2018, p. 581).

IV. Methodological framework

1. Research design.

Considering the goal of this study and the analytical framework developed earlier, there are only a few valid choices for the conception of the research design. In the field in which this study evolves, International and Security Studies, empirically based research has for the most part been conducted using case study methods. According to Kacowicz (2002), case study methods have been largely used because of their ability to bring light to the “ontological and epistemological debates” of that same field (Kacowicz, 2002, p. 133). Likewise, since it tries to explain the foreign policy decision-making process, prospect theory is often employed in studies involving single or comparative case studies, as this method provides ground to test the implications of the theory with empirical pieces of evidence, to put “result obtained in the laboratory” to the test of reality (Morin & Paquin, 2018, p. 247).

The choice of the single case study method for this study is motivated by its attributes in light of the research problem described in the introduction. A single case study has great heuristic power, as it enables the researchers to concentrate on a single issue, or a single problem to solve while concentrating on the different elements of answers in a particular context (Kacowicz, 2002, p. 128). Likewise, it provides ample ground for theory testing, or for ‘theory-informed’ studies. Regarding previous research done under the prospect theory framework, and for all the reasons given here, the single case study method has been widely used (Allison, 1971; Dougherty, 2013; McDermott, 2001; Marandici, 2023). In addition, in terms of epistemology, the choice of a single case study, which as a method is rather seen as being part of the positivist paradigm, fits better since the rational approach to foreign policy decision-making is inherently positivist (Kacowicz, 2002; Smith, 2019).

The research problem guiding this study is to determine why the French leadership decided to end its main military operation in the Sahel, despite persisting interests in the region. As such, this study is primarily a problem-solving investigation, an attempt to determine what led to the presented outcome: the end of Operation Barkhane in 2022¹. The strategy here is to capture

the hypothesised causal link between the long-term limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel and the studied outcome. This ‘capture’ is achieved through the single, rigorous case exploration of the preceding and the decision to end Operation *Barkhane* in 2022. Since it was hypothesised that the long-term limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel were one of the main drivers of the outcome, the timeline of interest for this case study is between 2014 and 2022.

As it could have been expected, there are certain limitations in the use of the single case study method. According to Kacowicz (2002), the method suffers from three main problems: “case-selection bias, endogeneity and serious limitations to external validity” (Kacowicz, 2002, p. 124). The problem of case-selection bias in this study cannot be realistically avoided, as the case study is built around a certain problem with certain settings. In addition, a few other cases could bring additional explanations for the problem at stake. The issue of endogeneity is also less important in this study, as the case is heavily detailed and focuses on particular elements and links of causality. The problem of external validity is dealt with through the adoption of a limited scope of this investigation: it aims at bringing a new approach to the academic debate on a unique problem. As stated in the introduction, other explanations may be as valid as the one presented here and they are probably complementary explanations for the problem at stake. Yet, limited in time and scope, this study does not include those other hypotheses in its analysis but will discuss those in the conclusion.

2. Process tracing.

To explain and assess the causal mechanisms at play here, with the final objective of understanding how the independent variables impacted the outcome, this study utilizes, within the built case, the process-tracing method. Process tracing is “the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analysed in light of research questions and hypotheses” (Collier, 2011). The idea here is to test pieces of evidence built along the case study through causal inference tests — the causal inference is “the empirically backed identification of the cause and effect of an examined phenomenon” (Smith, 2019, p. 8) — to confirm, refute or increase the

plausibility of a certain hypothesis. Process tracing will thus be used to determine the explanatory power of the hypothesis leading this study onto the research problem at hand.

The choice of process tracing is heavily influenced by the overarching framework of this study. Process tracing has been used largely in FPA for its heuristic abilities: it enables researchers to ‘see’ inside the case and assess the causal mechanisms at play, and as such brings great explanatory power in problem-solving studies. Process tracing is more feasible and easier to operationalise, it also resembles a “detailed and careful historical analysis”, which is exactly the goal of this study (Kacowicz, 2002, p. 127). Such a methodological strategy is also rather malleable and provides the researchers with a different option to ‘tailor’ the methodological approach to the theoretical framework and case study.

As such, there are several variants of process tracing: “theory testing, theory building, and outcome explanation” (Smith, 2019, p. 3). The first is deductive, as it builds on the theory and confirms or rejects its explanatory power over a certain issue. In contrast, the second is inductive, starting “from the empirical observations to assert a causal theory” (Smith, 2019, p. 4). The last one is the ‘outcome explanation’ variant, using “both deductive and inductive logic” in a “dynamic back-and-forth between theory and empirical observations” to assess the causal mechanisms at play in the case (Smith, 2019, p. 4). Accordingly, only certain types of data are relevant in the operationalisation process within-case process tracing, those types being “account evidence, trace evidence, pattern evidence and sequence evidence” (Smith, 2019, p. 7). The first type is based on primary and secondary literature, and observations can be made through those documents. The second type contains evidence that can be used by their sole existence: certain events, and certain decisions that can give us valuable information on a certain causal relationship (Smith, 2019, p. 7). The third type includes pieces of evidence that take the form of observable patterns in quantitative studies. The final type, sequence evidence, is “gathered [...] from the examination of the temporal and spatial chronology of events” (Smith, 2019, p. 7).

With the different pieces of evidence collected, tests are to be performed to determine whether they show causal inference. Causal inference is the “empirically backed identification of

the cause and effect of an examined phenomenon” (Smith, 2019, p. 8). There are four different types of tests, each providing a different level of uniqueness and certainty for the pieces of evidence: straw-in-the-wind, hoop, double-decisive and smoking gun tests (Smith, 2019, p. 8). The straw-in-the-wind test consists of proving the presence of the predicted causal elements, but it cannot provide substantial certainty that it caused causal inference, and as such, if passed, it only confirms that the hypothesis is relevant (Collier, 2011). The hoop test functions like a straw-in-the-wind test, but it searches for specific causal elements, the ‘hoop’ is reduced and as such it only enables a comparison between the hypothesis and rival ones (Beach and Pederson, 2019, p. 103). The smoking gun test requires the direct observation of the cause and predicted effects, and as such enables the validation of the hypothesis (Collier, 2011). The double-decisive test is the direct observation of the causal inference taking place, which is highly unlikely, and requires the elimination of the other possible explanations, thus confirming the hypothesis and eliminating the rival hypotheses (Beach and Pederson, 2019, p. 103; Collier, 2011).

Beach and Pederson (2019) provide techniques and a methodological framework to put process tracing into action the ‘outcome explanation’ variant within a single case study. The primary goal is to capture the causal mechanisms at play between the independent variable (X) and the dependent variable (Y), which would imply that there is an indirect causal relationship between X and Y in the studied case. Those causal mechanisms or intervening variables (M) are “interlocking parts that transfer causal energy from X to Y” (Beach and Pederson, 2019). If a study is theory-informed, and as such deductive by nature, the causal mechanisms ‘informed by the theory’ (M) should corroborate with the empirical pieces of evidence (Beach and Pederson, 2019). It is expected that the study finds, through this back-and-forth, a minimally sufficient explanation for the outcome (Y). The ‘minimally sufficient’ explanation should explain, if not an overwhelming part of the outcome, at least a substantial part (Beach and Pederson, 2019).

3. Operationalisation.

Building on the learnings of the prospect theory approach to foreign policy decision-making, this study utilizes the outcome explanation variant of process tracing to test the

hypothesis announced early on in the introduction. It was indeed hypothesized that the long-term limitations of the French regional strategy applied to the conflict in the Sahel (X) contributed to the decision to end Operation *Barkhane* in 2022 (Y).

The prospect theory informs us on how. It also informs us that when they are confronted with multiple options, they are risk-takers when there is the certainty of achieving gains, while they are cautious when there is the certainty of contracting losses. Considering the two last elements, foreign policy change is expected when decision-makers perceive their situation to be in the domain of loss, and foreign policy change is expected when decision-makers can secure minimal gains or cut minimal losses. Finally, foreign policy change is more likely if the continuation of the previous policy brings the certainty of more losses than gains.

Based on that last component and the hypothesis guiding this study, the operationalisation takes a deductive direction, and sequenced causal interactions are expected to go as follows:

(X): Numerous long-term limitations to the French strategy in the Sahel.

(1): French decision-makers perceive their situation to be in the domain of losses in comparison to their point of reference. The current policy brings the certainty of contracting more losses.

(2): In most available options, there is a high probability of contracting more losses than gains. One available option enables cutting minimal losses.

(Y): Decision is made to end Operation *Barkhane* in 2022.

In the analysis component of the study, the in-depth case study of the French intervention in the Sahel is conducted to gather account evidence, sequence evidence and trace evidence. The timeframe of importance here is from 2014 to 2022, as it enables us to understand how the long-term limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel in the same timeframe led to the reframing of

the French situation. This timeframe does not include the effective withdrawal of French forces from Mali (August 2022), Burkina Faso (February 2023) and Niger (December 2023), as the end of Operation *Barkhane* was announced as early as July 2021, to be effective in early 2022. While the literature review has already provided numerous important elements for the conduct of the analysis, some points are still missing, such as a description of the French decision-making system for foreign policy and intervention matters. This short description is made at the beginning of the analysis component.

In the next component, those different pieces of evidence are then tested under the framework of process tracing to determine their causal force on the studied outcome. To that same extent, this will validate or reject the study's hypothesis explanatory power on the research problem stated in the introduction. Finally, the study aims for a minimal satisfactory explanation of the outcome (Y) with the independent variable (X) and not for a full explanation of the outcome. As such, it opens the way for further studies to explain the end of Operation *Barkhane* in 2022.

4. Data.

As said earlier, data in this study is collected to build the pieces of evidence that are then tested under the process-tracing framework. The data is collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are composed of governmental documents, speeches and statements from the decision-makers and other governmental figures as well as decision-makers' interventions in specific parliamentary inquiries. Firstly, it is important to note that since 2008 in France, the executive body (the decision-makers) has had the constitutional obligation to report on its external operations (called OPEX – *OPeration EXterieur*) throughout the operation.

As such, 6 different extensive parliamentary reports were built and delivered to the French National Assembly and Senate on the matter of the French intervention in the Sahel between 2013 and 2023. Decision-makers and high-ranking officers directly involved in the

intervention and its continuation were also called to testify in parliamentary inquiries, during and after the intervention. To that extent, numerous official and unofficial statements and speeches on that matter were made during the intervention and are now available in transcription or multimedia documents.

There are widely available secondary sources on the subject. While the literature review has already presented, at great length, the most relevant works on the intervention in the Sahel, some accounts were not included there and will be used to build the pieces of evidence. Other pieces of secondary sources could not integrate the literature review: multiple experts often present their findings in less academic forms, for example in newspapers such as *Le Monde*, *France24*, *Le Point*, and *Le Figaro* or specialised websites such as ‘War on the Rocks’, and NGOs such as ACLED. Interviews with relevant actors of the intervention are often made and published in those different newspapers and websites, sometimes as videos or audio documents.

To that same extent, interviews with relevant actors of the intervention are sometimes conducted during seminars of institutions attached to the French Ministry of Defence, such as the *École de Guerre* (the French equivalent to West Point Military Academy in the US). In all, there is a great variety of available primary and secondary sources. None refers nor describes directly the decision-making process which is of much interest for this study. Like in all defence matters, we can expect that those documents are classified, and it is highly likely that would not be declassified in the near future.

5. Methodological limitations.

The recency of the events brings a first limitation to the methodological approach taken in this investigation. As recalled in the last component, the study is conducted with the available data, and while there is plenty of available information on the problem explored here, the sources that would give us a decisive answer to the research question are not available because classified. Likewise, it can be expected that, as time goes by, actors involved in the decision-making process

will start providing new information on the subject through interviews, autobiographies, or interventions in seminars. As such, while this investigation aims for the best results with the available information nowadays, their validity may be impacted in the future as some official documents are declassified and involved actors start providing their testimonies of the decision-making process.

The second limitation is that the research method was ‘tailored’ to the case, and as the study aims to explain only a specific outcome, it bears little replicability and external validity. This limitation was anticipated in the research method component, as this is a known limitation of the single case study method. As such, while the overall framework and relationship with prospect theory may inspire other researchers, the conclusions of this investigation could not inform other potential studies on similar phenomena. The scope of this investigation is narrow, as time and available materials are limited.

Like in most security-related investigations, there are ethical considerations that should not be disregarded. Although this study is conducted from an external point of view, somewhat detached from the investigated reality, one should not forget the suffering related to conflicts, and this sinuous war that has claimed the lives of many innocents. This will be taken into account for the duration of the study.

V. Analysis

1. The decisional triangle of French foreign policy decision-making.

Before conducting the empirical analysis and the in-depth case study of the French intervention in the Sahel, it is important to understand how Paris conducts foreign policy decision-making. In this short component, following the rich description made by Erforth (2020), the actors and characteristics of this foreign policy decision-making structure are presented.

According to Erforth (2020), the foreign policy decision-making structure on defence matters is articulated as a triangle with three main actors. The first and most important is the French President of the Republic and his personal advisors (Erforth, 2020, p. 36). The French political and constitutional model is known to give important political and decisional power to the President, but it is perhaps in the realm of security and foreign policy that this concentration of power is most visible. The President is the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, and as such is the one making the final decision on its use (Erforth, 2020, p. 36). This ability to make the final decision is not limited to the use of the French Armed Forces, as important foreign policy and defence matters are part of the informal yet internally recognised “exclusive competency” of the President (Erforth, 2020, p. 37). On that aspect, one can recognise the visible omnipresence of the current French President, Emmanuel Macron, in the matters of the French policy towards the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Nonetheless, the idea that the President of the Republic acts ‘in a vacuum’ is not accurate, as he is personally advised by three important figures: the diplomatic advisor, a military advisor (*Chef d’État-major Particulier du Président de la République*, CEMP, Chief of Staff to the President of the Republic), and the African advisor if such matter is related to Africa (who is also the head of the *cellule Africaine*) (Erforth, 2020, p. 39).

The triangle is completed by the two relevant ministries for foreign policy making: the Defence Ministry, which represents the French Armed Forces as well as French intelligence community (with the most important component being the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure, or DGSE, and the Direction du Renseignement Militaire, the DRM), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, commonly referred as the *Quai d’Orsay* (Erforth, 2020, p. 41). In comparison

to the President of the Republic, these two ministries are the source of expertise and information on the problem at hand but have no authority in the decision-making process (Erforth, 2020, p. 45). The decision is made after the reunion of the *Conseil Restreint de Défense*, or Restricted Defence Council, composed of the Presidential element and the two ministries, which present and deliberates on the different considerations and options (Erforth, 2020, p. 44). This is not a body of collective foreign policy decision-making but rather an “advisory board whose purpose is to facilitate presidential decision-making” (Erforth, 2020, p. 45). As such, the President retains his ultimate authority in the decision-making process, he is the one making the final decision, while the ministries may frame the situation and present the different options available. Parliamentary institutions are not involved in the process, yet they are to be informed on all aspects of the new foreign policy and its evolution by both the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs during parliamentary inquiries (Erforth, 2020).

Erforth (2020) notes that there is an important homogeneity in the profiles of decision-makers, assistants and advisors that are present during the foreign-policy decision-making process. Most have passed through the elitist schools that provide formation for public servants in France, such as the National School of Administration (*École Nationale d'Administration*, or ENA) or the Paris Institute of Political Studies (*Sciences Po*). Erforth (2020) argue on that point that it fosters intellectual uniformity rather than diversity, a certain inability to think outside the box.

In the timeframe of this study, there have been several changes to the composition of the decision-making and advisory components. The French President of the Republic that started the intervention, François Hollande stayed until 2017, when Emmanuel Macron was elected for a five-year term. The inauguration of the new president meant that many of the advisors were replaced. Jacques Audibert, the diplomatic advisor to François Hollande, was replaced by Phillipe Étienne, who was then substituted by Emmanuel Bonne in 2019 (Merchet, 2019). Hélène Le Gal, the African Affairs advisor, gave her seat to Frank Paris (Marnouyet, 2017). The military advisor to the President of the Republic, General Benoît Puga until 2016, was replaced by Admiral

Bernard Rogel, before the nomination of Admiral Jean-Phillipe Rolland in 2020 (Lagneau, 2016; Merchet, 2020). In the meantime, there were also changes at the Ministry of Defence and the *Quai d'Orsay*. Jean-Yves Le Drian, who had been the defence minister since 2012, and had played an important role in the intervention in 2013, was replaced by Florence Parly in 2017 (Lagneau, 2017). Le Drian went on to be the minister of foreign affairs, replacing Laurent Fabius, a position he will occupy until 2022, thus being a relevant actor for the duration of the studied timeline (Doukhan, 2017).

2. Sequencing the French intervention in the Sahel.

The first important step of this in-depth case study of the French intervention in the Sahel between 2014 and 2022 is the sequencing of the events at stake, to recompose the timeline of events leading to the end of Operation *Barkhane*, and thus rebuild the different stages of the decision-making process concerning the investigated outcome.

The initial stage goes from 2014 to 2018-2019, the first years of Operation *Barkhane*. It started after the success of Operation *Serval* in 2013, which saw the swift suppression and destruction of the jihadist groups' offensive capabilities, thanks to the intervention of substantial pre-positioned French military capabilities on the African continent and the rapid introduction in the theatre of operation of a larger expeditionary force (Assemblée Nationale, 2014, p. 33). In less than three weeks, the French Army were able to mobilise and project a 4000-strong force to the fight against the jihadist groups in Northern Mali, regaining control over the Algerian-Malian border in less than six months (Sénat, 2016, p. 119). Operation *Barkhane* was thus introduced on the 1st of August 2014, primarily to prevent the re-implantation of jihadist groups in the Sahel, through the disruption of their logistical support lines and caches as well as the identification and destruction of such groups (Sénat, 2016, p. 123). Maintaining the pressure on the jihadist groups would give time for the stabilisation of Northern Mali with the help of the MINUSMA and the formation of the Sahelian Armed Forces with the support of the European Union (Sénat, 2016, p. 123). It is important to note that as of 2014, in addition to the Sahelian Saharan Strip, the French

Armed Forces were also deployed in the Central African Republic under Operation *Sangaris*, which had been ongoing since December 2013 and were in the middle of their withdrawal from Afghanistan started in November 2012 (Assemblée Nationale, 2014).

The first years of Operation *Barkhane* of the limited application of the French strategy in the Sahel under the concept of the *approche globale* saw visible improvements in the security situation in Mali (Sénat, 2016, p. 131). The military success against the jihadist groups had enabled the first elections since the 2012 coup, and thus the restoration of a civilian government under the presidency of Ibrahim Boubakar Keïta (IBK), which in turn and with the diplomatic support of France, had started the peace negotiations with the Tuareg movements (Sénat, 2016, p. 131). The negotiations, which had stalled for two years, finally led to the Alger Peace Agreement in June 2015, thanks to the pressure applied on both parties by the West African nations, the international community and Paris (Sénat, 2016, p. 162; RFI, 2015). The G5 Sahel organisation, which had been created in 2014, was also getting more capable in terms of cooperation between the Sahelian states (RFI, 2014a; VOA, 2015). In the meantime, the implementation of the Alger Peace Agreement proved to be a complicated enterprise, and while the jihadist groups had been pushed into hiding, their tactics changed towards low-intensity insurgency and terrorist attacks across the Saharan Sahelian Strip, as can be observed with the first attack on Bamako in November 2015, Ouagadougou in January 2016 and the emergence of the IED threat in the Sahel (Lyammouri, 2015; France Info, 2016; Sénat, 2016). Yet, the outbreaks of violence were expected to decrease with the further application of the *approche globale* strategy and its ‘3Ds’, as well as with the achievement of the full operational capacity of the EU’s training mission in Mali (Sénat, 2016).

The election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017 and the subsequent change in the ministries and presidential advisors’ composition (described in the last component) did not change the direction of the French intervention in the Sahel. Five days after his election, French President Emmanuel Macron went to the main French base in the Sahel, Gao, where he re-confirmed the necessity to prolong Operation *Barkhane*, citing the expansion of terrorism in the region and the

terrorist attacks in France as the main justification for such prolongation (Élysée, 2017). The French President also reiterated the need for political actions from the Malian actors to improve the implementation of the Alger Peace Agreement of 2015, as well as for the multiplication and deepening of the development aid in the Sahel (Élysée, 2017).

The two next years, between the election of French President Emmanuel Macron and the beginning of 2020 saw a deterioration of the security situation in the zone of three borders, as the jihadist groups had started bypassing the French forces concentrated in Northern Mali to establish themselves in the ‘zone of the three borders’ (between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger) (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 6). Attacks in both Niger and Burkina Faso started increasing rapidly, as can be seen with the tragic ‘Tongo Tongo ambush’ in Niger, or the renewed attack on Ouagadougou (BBC, 2018; Warner & Hulme, 2018). Even more problematically, those attacks, which were until then conducted by AQIM, also called JNIM (*Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin*) in the Sahel, started to be organised by another group, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) (Assemblée Nationale, 2019). The ISGS, which was only a 400-hundred-strong group in 2018, rapidly became the main threat to the French forces in the centre of Mali, where they established themselves alongside the JNIM (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 6). The jihadist insurrection, which has become increasingly cross-border, elicited a new response from the Sahelian states, with the creation of the ‘G5 Sahel Joint Task Force’ in 2017, 5000 soldiers from the Sahelian nations and an agreement to allow the pursuit in the neighbouring state (up to 50km) of jihadist formations (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 17). To the same extent and following the announcement of the French President in 2017, development aids have indeed increased, and the collaboration between the French Army and the French Office for Development has been strengthened (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 7; Sénat, 2023, p. 19).

A turning point can be found in 2019, with the multiplication of French casualties in the region, and a security environment out of Paris’ control. The end of 2019 was marked by the crushing defeat of the Malian and Nigerian Armed Forces during raids against their bases by the ISGS and JNIM, further confirming the deterioration of the security situation in the Sahel (Sénat,

2023, p. 15). In May 2019, two members of the French Special Operations Forces (SOF) were killed during a rescue operation in Burkina Faso, they will receive military honours under an important mediatic cover at the *Invalides* (FRANCE 24, 2019b). In November 2019, during a tactical operation in Central Mali, 13 French soldiers were killed in a helicopter crash, the worst day for the French Army since the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing, an attack that had led to its withdrawal from Lebanon (FRANCE 24, 2019c). Military honours are given at the *Invalides*, once again under important mediatic cover, as 2019 ends with 17 soldiers '*Mort pour la France*' (lit. 'died for France') (FRANCE 24, 2020c).

A new stage of the French intervention can be found in the 2019-2020 period. 2019 brings a decisive shift in how Paris perceives the goal of Operation *Barkhane*. As the jihadist groups did succeed in implanting themselves in the zone of the 'three borders', which comes in direct opposition to the objectives stated in August 2014, the new goal is the "attrition of the [jihadist] armed groups" to rebuild "a state of sufficient equilibrium permitting the Malian army to deal with an enemy at their level" (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 23). In the words of Michel Goya, the goal is to "maintain violence at a satisfactory level" (Nadau, 2019). This plan presupposes that the Malian army (Sahelian Armies at large) would be able to increase their capabilities to take on the fight (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 23). The French forces' composition is subsequently altered to integrate more specialised and mobile components (the emphasis is made on special operation forces). (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 23). Their role will be to directly support the Sahelian armies and hunt for valuable targets, rather than to conduct larger operations of counterinsurgency in combination with the one conducted by the Sahelian armies. (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 23).

To go along with the new purpose of Operation *Barkhane*, Paris 'doubled down' on all the aspects of its *approche globale* in 2020. In January 2020, during the Pau Summit, Paris pushed for further cooperation between the Sahelian nations, the European Union and the UN/African Union, resulting in the creation of the 'Coalition for the Sahel' (France Diplomatie, 2020). Its main objective was to provide continuous support to the Sahelian nations, in terms of development

and military aid, by allocating significant financial assistance and introducing a European Task Force in the Sahel (Task Force Takuba) (Coalition Sahel, 2020). Furthermore, in February 2020, Florence Parly announced the further deployment of a 600-soldier-strong force in the Sahel, to increase the capabilities of Operation *Barkhane*, bringing the total of French soldiers deployed in the region to 5100 (FRANCE 24, 2020).

This was Paris' initial response to the limited failure in the Sahel. Following this new impetus, a limited improvement in the security situation can be observed, as the French Armed Forces successfully conducted their attrition strategy against the jihadist groups in the 'zone of the three borders' (RFI, 2020). Multiple leaders of the JNIM and ISGS are killed, and their influence in the zone is reduced, yet the return of the Sahelian forces and institutions in the zone is limited (RFI, 2020). This improvement is costly for the French Army, with 10 lives lost in 2020 (Maillard, 2020). In the meantime, the political turmoil in Mali against the unpopular IBK and his government had no impact on the continuation of Operation *Barkhane*. The military coup that toppled the Malian President IBK in August 2020 did not elicit much of a reaction from Paris other than a condemnation of the action, as the French forces continued their work with the Malian Army (Shurkin, 2020). French President Emmanuel Macron even announced in early 2021 that the transitional authorities that had emerged after the coups gave more guarantees in a few months for the continuation of the French intervention than the toppled government had in three years (Élysée, 2021a).

Despite these tactical successes achieved locally, outbreaks of violence spread further during the first six months of 2021, extending along the Malian-Burkinabe and the Niger-Burkinabe border (Nsaibia & Duhamel, 2021). The inter-ethnic conflict in the 'zone of the three borders', which was until then circumscribed to small skirmishes between the different communities, got wider and more intensive, with the creation of various ethnic self-defence forces battling against each other (Nsaibia & Duhamel, 2021). While the jihadist groups were indeed diminished by the attrition battle against the French Army, they proved impressively resilient and managed to re-constitute their ranks taking advantage of the climate of hostility between the

different ethnic groups (Nsaibia & Duhamel, 2021; Sénat, 2023). Civilian casualties soared dramatically during the first months of 2021 due to acts of violence committed by all sides; the blunder of the Bounti airstrike stroke a heavy blow to the reputation of the French Forces in the Sahel (Nsaibia & Duhamel, 2021). The French public opinion also started to be increasingly against the continuation of Operation *Barkhane*. By January 2021, polls had shown that 51% of the respondents were against the French intervention in Mali (IFOP, 2021). Those difficulties opened the way in the decision-making circles for a new round of reflection on the future of the French operation, a year after the decision to ‘double down’ and augment its operational capabilities.

The first discussions on the future of Operation *Barkhane* are opened as early as February 2021. During the N’Djamena Summit of the G5 Sahel, while French President Emmanuel Macron rejected the idea of a massive withdrawal of its forces from the Sahel until the summer of 2021, he announced that Paris was willing to transform Operation *Barkhane* if conditions were met, in a lighter operation with a strong European component with the Task Force Takuba, leaving the framework of combat operations towards localised counter-terrorism actions (Élysée, 2021a). This element confirms the will to start a progressive withdrawal from the Sahel while it definitively excludes the option of a swift exit from the region. As the beginning of the summer approached, the situation had not evolved positively (as shown in the last paragraph), and the political turmoil in Mali had even led to a second military coup in May 2021. This second coup, less than a year after the first one, provoked this time a clear reaction from Paris, condemning the takeover and suspending its military cooperation with Bamako (Salaün, 2021).

In the next stage, the option of the progressive disengagement of French forces from the conflict in the Sahel is acted on at the beginning of the summer. On the 10th of June 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the end of Operation *Barkhane*, which is to be replaced by a military and technical support operation to the benefit of the G5 Sahel’s armies, on the condition that such mission is requested by the Sahelian nations (Élysée, 2021b). The emphasis is put on the European Task Force Takuba, which will be the ‘kinetic’ [in the sense of ‘combat’]

force of this new structure (Élysée, 2021b). According to the Chief of Staff of the French Armed Forces (CEMA), General François Lecointre (who subsequently resigned in July 2021), this option had been on the table since 2019 and had become the best option available by 2021 (Le Figaro, 2021). The precise modalities of this change will not be known until the beginning of July 2021. In the meantime, following an agreement with the new authorities of Bamako, French forces resume their joint operations with the Malian army (FRANCE 24, 2021a).

On the 9th of July, at the end of a new Summit of the G5 Sahel, French President Emmanuel Macron presents the modalities of the end of Operation *Barkhane* (Élysée, 2021c). The operation would end in the first months of 2022 and would introduce a reduction of the French contingent to the Sahel, from 5100 to 2500 soldiers (Élysée, 2021c; FRANCE 24, 2021b). Such reduction will not occur before the end of 2021, to give time for the preparation of the transformations ahead and includes the closure of numerous French bases in Northern Mali (Élysée, 2021c). From those 2500 soldiers, a significant part would form the “backbone” of Task Force Takuba based in Mali, a large group of SOF operators will be kept in Burkina Faso under Task Force Sabre, while the rest will be dedicated to the training and support of the Sahelian armies or to react to an emerging security crisis in the region (Élysée, 2021c; FRANCE 24, 2021b). The two task forces are to continue with the mission of elimination and disruption of the jihadist group’s leadership, while the remaining troops would integrate the new framework of support to the state of G5 Sahel (Élysée, 2021c). This stage closes the fate of Operation *Barkhane*, destined to end in 2022 and to be replaced with a smaller-scale operation, one more in line with the US security initiative in the Sahel, based on SOF operations and training support.

In the last stage of Operation *Barkhane*, the implementation of the progressive withdrawal option ran into significant complications. At the end of 2021, the level of violence had stabilised in Mali but was in constant expansion in Burkina Faso and Niger (Nsaibia, 2022). Despite those tactical successes in Mali, the relationship between Bamako and Paris took an inopportune turn as the Malian junta invited Russian military advisors (FRANCE 24, 2021c; Vincent & Le Cam, 2021). The opposition between Paris and Bamako escalated as the private military company

(PMC) Wagner arrived in the country, leading to a precipitated decision to withdraw French forces in February 2022 (FRANCE 24, 2022a). While Bamako put pressure to accelerate the withdrawal, Paris organised their exit from Mali to ensure the protection of international missions such as the MINUSMA, leaving the country on the 15th of August of 2022 (FRANCE 24, 2022b; Le Monde, 2022a). In Burkina Faso, President Kaboré was ousted by a military coup in January 2022, and while it did not have an immediate impact on the transformation process of Operation *Barkhane*, the subsequent takeover in September 2022 did worsen the relations between Ouagadougou and Paris (Le Monde, 2022b). In light of the events of 2022, and months after its planned conclusion, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the official termination of Operation *Barkhane* on the 9th of November 2022 (Vie Publique, 2022b).

This announcement closes the final stage of Operation *Barkhane* and to the same extent the sequencing of the operation. For the sake of clarity, the sequencing is summarised in Figure 1.

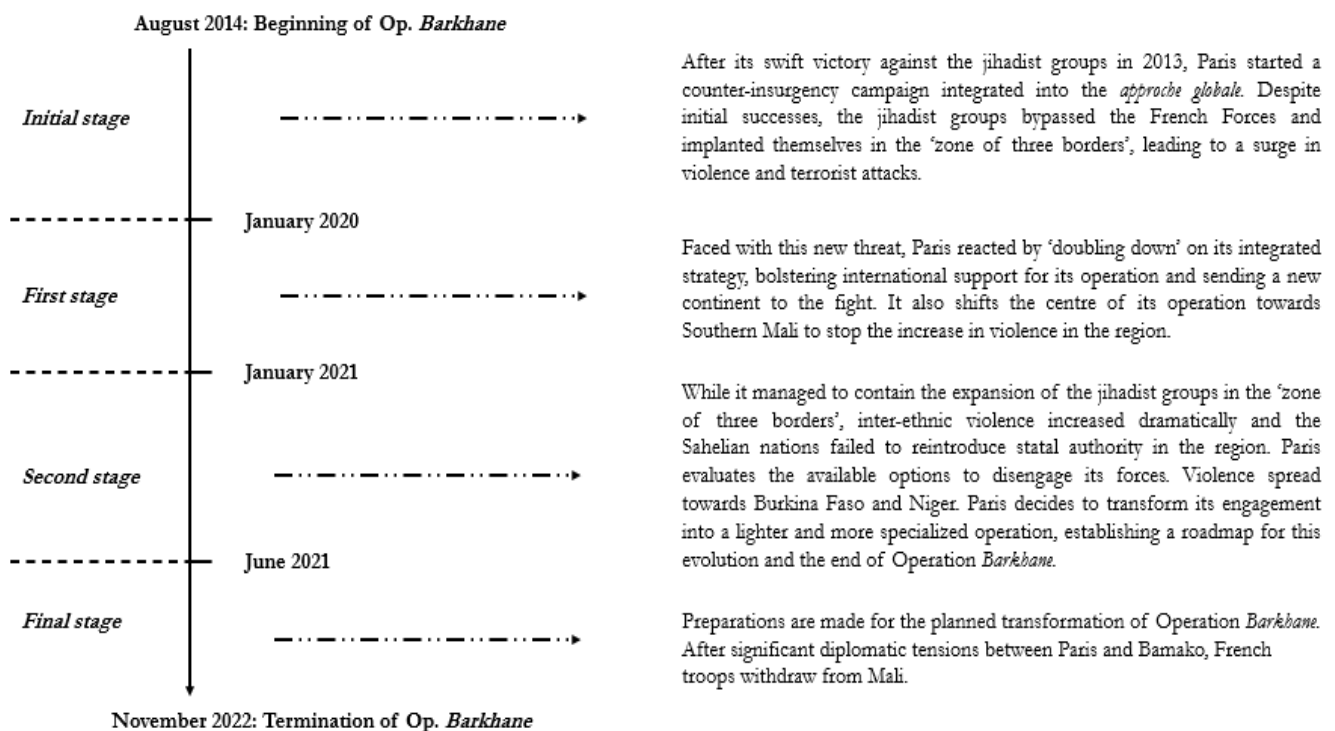


Figure 1: Sequencing of Operation *Barkhane* (author's own construction).

3. Evolution of the point of reference and the perceived domain.

The theoretical approach of prospect theory to foreign policy decision-making informs us that decision-makers perceive their situation in the domain of gain or loss in relation to the point of reference. Hence, this component describes firstly how the point of reference evolved during the different stages enounced in the sequencing section, and how the perception of the domain changed throughout Operation *Barkhane*.

In the initial stage of Operation *Barkhane*, between August 2014 and the end of 2020, there is a first clear point of reference. The success of Operation *Serval* in 2013, in which the speed and sheer kinetic force of the French Armed Forces enabled the expulsion of the jihadist groups from Central Mali, and the stabilisation of the Malian state, is framed as giving Paris an advantageous position in the Sahelian crisis (Assemblée Nationale, 2014, p. 159). Jihadist groups have been pushed into the border region of Mali and as such are only capable of starting localised actions, most of the Tuareg nationalist groups, which are now in open conflict with AQMI, are open to negotiations with Bamako and have proven peaceful to both the MINUSMA and French Army (Assemblée Nationale, 2014, p. 170). The political transition in Bamako from the Malian Army towards the elected president IBK has been successful after the failure of the Ouagadougou Peace Agreement, negotiations between Malian authorities and the Tuareg rebellion are once again underway (Assemblée Nationale, 2014; RFI, 2014b). As such, the point of reference in the initial stage is the status quo of 2014-2015: the limited presence of the terrorist threat in the border region, the conflict resolution process underway in Northern Mali, and political reforms in preparation in Bamako. In addition, the reconstruction of the Malian army has been started, and the diplomatic efforts to mobilise the other Sahelian nations have led to the structuration of the G5 Sahel.

At the beginning of the initial stage, the domain in which French decision-makers perceived to be in light of their situation and of the point of reference was principally one of gains. By 2016, the peace process between Bamako and the Tuareg nationalists has advanced significantly, marking an important diplomatic success for Paris and an improvement in the

security conditions for Central and Northern Mali (Sénat, 2016, p. 132). While their contribution remains small in comparison to the French one, Paris managed its push for greater involvement of the European and African Union in the stabilisation efforts in the Sahel (Sénat, 2016). In addition, even though the implementation of the development component of the *approche globale* has been advancing slowly, the French Forces are involved in multiple socio-economical actions in Mali while Paris organises the first funds' allocations on the ground by 2017 (Gaulme, 2019, p. 24; Sénat, 2016, p. 125). The G5 Sahel Joint Task Force, built after a common agreement in 2017, was finally operational, providing one more tool for the fight against the jihadist groups in the Sahel (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 17). Even after an increase in violence during the year 2018, with the beginning of the jihadist expansion in the 'zone of the three borders', French President Emmanuel Macron the successes of Operation *Barkhane* and the positive impact of the *approche globale* (Élysée, 2018).

In 2019, the shift of the focal point of the jihadist insurgency towards the 'zone of the three borders' impacted dramatically the perceived domain of the situation for Paris. As said earlier, the Sahelian armies proved unable to defeat their enemy despite their reconstruction through the combined effort of the EU and France (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 18; Sénat, 2023, p. 15). The Sahelian states were also unable to prevent the escalation of ethnic violence in this region, as most local administrations and police forces were particularly deficient. The swift expansion of violence across the 'zone of the three borders' directly threatened the gains made since 2014 in the Sahel, as this spillover affected a larger zone that could destabilise Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. Paris' reaction was first to redirect parts of its forces towards this new focal point, but this was not sufficient to stop that new wave of violence and stretched the French Armed Forces to a dangerous extent (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 23). The uncertainty on the evolution of the situation led to a sentiment of urgency in the French decision-making circle, as can be observed in the surprising announcement of a G5 Sahel Summit in Pau by French President Emmanuel Macron after the harsh months of late 2019 (Vie Publique, 2019).

The Pau Summit of January 2020 marks the beginning of the first stage described earlier. To secure the gains achieved in the last 5 and a half years of Operation *Barkhane*, the decision is made to ‘double down’ on the development and diplomatic elements of the *approche globale* and to reinforce the human and material capabilities of the French forces in the Sahel. It also marks the establishment of a second point of reference adjusted to the reality in the region. While the jihadist activity in Northern Mali has been significantly reduced, the ‘zone of the three borders’ has become a major stronghold for both the JNIM and ISGS. Due to the lack of state presence in the zone, ethnic violence is expanding rapidly along the three borders, providing fertile ground for the expansion of the jihadist’ ranks. The Sahelian armies and the MINUSMA are still unable to take on the fight alone, without French support. The Malian and Burkinabe states are still highly fragile.

During the first stage, between January 2020 and January 2021, thanks to the combined French and Sahelian efforts to curb the jihadist insurgency in the ‘zone of the three borders’, the jihadist stronghold in the zone ceased to exist and the Sahelian states therefore start re-establishing partial administrative control over the area. The situation is once again perceived to be in the domain of gains in relation to the point of reference established in January 2020 (and not the initial point of reference of 2014), as can be observed in the positive framing of the situation by French President Emmanuel Macron, and of the Ministers of Defence and Foreign Affairs in February 2021 (Élysée, 2021a; Vie Publique, 2021a). Nonetheless, the problem of the violence between the different ethnic groups remains unanswered even though it is identified as one of the drivers of the conflict, as Paris refuses to intervene in what it considers to be ‘Sahelian matters’ (Élysée, 2021a).

During the second stage, between January 2021 and June-July 2021, the security conditions are worsening outside of the ‘zone of the three borders’, mostly in Niger and Burkina Faso where there is a fast increase in jihadist attacks coupled with inter-ethnic violence. State authority is heavily disrupted in Northern Burkina Faso and Western Niger. The process of re-establishing administrative posts in Southern Mali is proving to be a complicated task due to the

inter-ethnic hostilities and proliferation of self-defence militias but is advancing. This situation is perceived to be in the domain of minimal loss by Paris compared to the point of reference established at Pau in 2020 (Assemblée Nationale, 2021a). The situation is characterised as minimal loss because while the threat of a re-implantation of the main jihadist groups is still present, the tactical successes of 2020 against ISGS and the JNIM are considered enough to prevent a regional security collapse like the one of 2019 (Vie Publique, 2022; Élysée, 2021b). French decision-makers also assess that the forces of the G5 Sahel have been strengthened sufficiently to take on the fight, alongside the MINUSMA and with European support (Vie Publique, 2022; Le Figaro, 2021). This situation is also perceived to be of minimal loss in another dimension, in domestic politics, where for the first time since 2014, public opinion has shifted towards opposition to the continuation of Operation *Barkhane* (IFOP, 2021).

It is in this situation of a perceived domain of minimal loss that the re-organisation and termination of Operation *Barkhane* are acted on. The next component decrypts how the long-term limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel directly impacted the perception of the different options available between the first and second phases.

4. Long-term limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel and their impact.

The different long-term limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel were already described at great length during the literature review. Four different general limitations were advanced: the inability to achieve enduring strategic success on the ground, the ineffectiveness of the “3D” strategy, the drawbacks of the “Sahelisation” and “Europeanisation” initiatives, and the irreconcilable interests of France and its Sahelian partners. In this component, the three first stages are investigated to determine the impact of such limitations on the viability of Operation *Barkhane*.

This would inform us of the presence of the hypothesised causal interaction in our case: (X) leading to the perception that the continuation of the operation in its form brings the certainty

of contracting more losses, and in a second phase, (X) leading to the perception that in most available options for policy change, there is a high probability of contracting more losses than gains, but one available option enables cutting minimal loss.

The discussion on the in-viability of Operation *Barkhane* is not only present in the second stage but has been a matter of reflection since the beginning of the operation in 2014. The scale of the region in comparison to the capabilities deployed on the ground is often the first and major problem cited limitation that doomed the security initiative and hindered any long-term success. This is recognised by decision-makers. In 2019, the CEMA Général Lecointre alerted on the derisory number of soldiers he had to conduct its counter-insurgency campaign in the Sahel (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 24). Indeed, of the 4500 soldiers present in the Sahel, a fraction is dedicated to logistics and base defence (30 to 40%), and a significant part was in fact stationed in Chad, leaving an operational force of about 2000 soldiers (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 24). Interestingly, the French contingent in Chad, although technically being part of Operation *Barkhane*, was in fact engaged in the continuation of Operation *Épervier*, which had the main objective to stabilise Chad by protecting N'Djamena from rebels' incursions, as could be seen with the French Air Forces' airstrikes on a Chadian rebel column in 2019 (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 24; FRANCE 24, 2019a).

In the initial stage, this force of 2000 soldiers had to fight its enemy in a space greater than France, in the desertic part of Mali, where materials were particularly impacted, leading to logistic constraints and the inability to apply the French doctrinal approach to counterinsurgency (*stratégie de la tâche d'huile*), nor to prevent the expansion of the jihadist threat towards Southern Mali (Assemblée Nationale, 2014; 2019; Sénat, 2016). In the first and second stages, when the insurgency was concentrated in the 'zone of the three borders', the zone of operation was still immense, about two times the size of continental Portugal, and while the '2020 troop surge' had increased the capabilities of the Operation *Barkhane*, this was not enough to contain the jihadist groups in 2021 (Sénat, 2023). To the same extent, the fact that the 'zone of the three borders' was more densely inhabited and smaller invited the French Army to take the approach of the *tâche*

d'huile between 2019 and 2021, but once again, the limited capabilities available prevented its articulation and operationalisation (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 23; Sénat, 2023, p. 16). In conclusion, the limited capabilities deployed on the ground in comparison to the scale of the region and the scale of the jihadist insurgencies reduced the probability of the success of Operation *Barkhane*. It did so in the short and long term, as the jihadist groups would keep the possibility to bypass the French troops and attack where those were not deployed, as was the case in both 2019-2020 and 2021.

This limitation was anticipated, and as seen earlier, under the framework of *approche globale*, Paris counted on the ‘Sahelisation’ and ‘Europeanisation’ initiatives launched in the initial stage to reinforce its capabilities in the short-term, and to supplement them in the long-term. Yet, in both the short and long term, those initiatives failed to deliver the desired effects. The training provided by EUTM Mali, aimed at re-structuring the Malian Army was considered heavily deficient in 2016, as the trained Malian soldiers proved unable to hold their positions against clearly inferior enemy forces (Sénat, 2016, p. 148). In 2019, the difficulties in re-building the Malian army were once again highlighted, advancing that the main problem remains the absence of a functioning state (of the Malian state in this case), the endemic corruption and the lack of organisation (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 20). The defeat of the Sahelian armies in the ‘zone of the three borders’ and the high level of sustained casualties (counted in battalions per year) at the end of 2019 is another symptom of their clear lack of capabilities and as such of the deficiencies of the EU’s training efforts (Sénat, 2023, p. 18).

The G5 Sahel Joint Task Force, which was anticipated to be the Sahelian ‘solution’ to trans-border incursions of the jihadist groups, was after all plagued with the deficiencies of the Sahelian armies, its structuration progressed slowly, and was, in the end, a “material, operational and cultural challenge” rather than the presented “miracle solution” (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 20; Sénat, 2023, p. 18). To another extent, there is the realisation that the Sahelian armies have been continuously perceived by the large spans of the local populations as “possibly predatory”, leading to an atmosphere of hostility between civilians and armed forces (Sénat, 2023, p. 16;

Assemblée Nationale, 2023, p. 81). This problem was not resolved with the training efforts and would compromise any attempt to re-establish sufficient security conditions in the region (Sénat, 2023, p. 16; Assemblée Nationale, 2023, p. 81).

The constant solicitation of greater involvement of the EU and its member states in the resolution of the Sahelian conflict produced better, yet insufficient results. The limitations of EUTM Mali were already presented earlier. In addition, most of the member-states, such as Germany, were reluctant to deploy their forces in direct combat operations (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 16). The Task Force Takuba was a significant advancement, one of the successes of the Pau Summit, but only came to be fully operational by early 2021 and was still composed mainly of French soldiers (Élysée, 2021c; FRANCE 24, 2021b). As such, the ‘Europeanisation’ initiative did not provide the planned ‘exit ramp’ imagined under the *approche globale* concept. The limits of both the ‘Sahelisation’ and ‘Europeanisation’ initiatives hindered the success of Operation *Barkhane* in the same ways that the limited deployed capabilities did, as it meant that the jihadist groups could always attack in another region and rebuild their strongholds and numbers. The hostility of the local populations towards the Sahelian armies, and in response, the exactions committed by those armies exacerbated the problem. Paris would always need to re-escalate its support to fight a resilient enemy, which would always come at the price of French lives, as was the case in 2019-2020.

The *approche globale* puts a particular emphasis on development to resolve crises such as the one in the Sahel. This was applied under the ‘3D’ strategy as seen during the literature review. Numerous development actions were accomplished for the duration of Operation *Barkhane*, and it is here that the ‘Europeanisation’ process achieved the most as Europe mobilised itself to a greater extent through the financial support of the EU and its member states (Assemblée Nationale, 2019; 2023; Sénat, 2023). Nonetheless, it also suffered important limitations, reducing its effectiveness and to a lesser extent the viability of Operation *Barkhane*. First, it is important to note that it only became a reality in 2018, as it took 4 years to organise the civilian-military approach and to start redirecting the AFD towards planned actions in the Sahel, where it had been

residual before the outbreak of the crisis (Sénat, 2023, p. 21). For the first four years, the amounts allocated to direct development actions in liaison with the actions of the French Armed Forces are derisory. In 2016, *Barkhane* only had a budget of 350 000€ for such actions (Sénat, 2016, p. 221).

The allocation of development aid ramped up in the following years, but it faced significant issues. The first one is the duplication of efforts in certain zones due to the lack of coordination between the different backers: NGOs, the EU, the UN and France often intervened in the same zone backing similar yet distinct projects (Sénat, 2023, p. 22). An important proportion of the development aid was applied to economic projects outside of the zones of crisis such as Northern Mali and the zone ‘of the three borders’, which should have received the most attention (Sénat, 2023, p. 22). These aids failed to address the deficiencies of the judicial, security and public services, concentrating to the contrary on economic and defence matters (Sénat, 2023, p. 22).

The struggles encountered in addressing the real problems in the Sahel are often linked to difficulties in identifying the needs on the ground where state authority is nonexistent and where inter-ethnic violence is rampant (Sénat, 2023, p. 22). The reality on the ground often came in opposition to the plans made by international backers. Before 2018, most of the development projects of the G5 Sahel had not started because of the technical limitations of the organisation (Antil & Vircoulon, 2024, p. 3). Even in matters of defence, international aid in funds and equipment was frequently hijacked by the political elites: between 2014 and 2019, 45% of the Nigerian defence budget was diverted; in Mali, the officers received the nickname of “billionaire generals” (Antil & Vircoulon, 2024, p. 4). Hence, while the development aspect of the ‘3D’ strategy was expected to enable progress to be made at the local and national level for the return of the state and the fight against the insurgencies, the reality on the ground limited its impact, and as such failed to accompany the tactical successes of Operation *Barkhane*.

The cornerstone of the different limitations of the French strategy applied to the Sahel can be found in the irreconcilable interests between Paris and the Sahelian regimes. In Mali, Bamako had been impressively reluctant to apply the Algier Peace Agreement of 2015 and had

since considered the imposition of such an agreement by Paris a treacherous act (Assemblée Nationale, 2023, p. 79). The political reforms, which should have been applied by Bamako after the elections of IBK failed to materialise, while the coups of 2020 and 2021 hindered the progress of this reformation process (Assemblée Nationale, 2023, p. 79). The return of state authority in the liberated zones was limited to the biggest concentrations of populations, as Bamako disregarded the question despite the importance of such a process for the success of Operation *Barkhane* and the financial support of international backers for those actions (Assemblée Nationale, 2023, p. 82). Any attempt by Paris to push for such actions was often perceived as an assault on their sovereignty by the Sahelian regimes. In Burkina Faso, even before the coups of 2022, the CEMA Général Lecointre observed that Ouagadougou was proving uncooperative and reluctant to share information on the situation on the ground with Paris and would hide its deficiencies (Assemblée Nationale, 2021a, p. 4). In Mali, the uncooperative stance adopted by Bamako on matters of security and development early on led to the frustration of French and European partners (Tull, 2019, p. 9). Once again, the rampant corruption in the Sahelian regimes acerbated the hostility from the local populations towards the Sahelian armies and the representant of the authority, providing fertile ground for the recruitment of new jihadist elements from all parts of the Sahel (Assemblée Nationale, 2023, p. 81). Those elements limited the efficacy of the French and European measures and to the same extent the efficacy of Operation *Barkhane*.

In all, this dichotomy between French and Sahelian interests had cascading effects on the other limitations identified earlier. Strengthening the Sahelian armies and the Sahelian authorities in the zone of conflict would not be possible without a strong political will to achieve the needed reform from the Sahelian elites. The same is true of the development aid planned under the '3D' strategy, without a strong will for change in Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey, most of this aid would not have a significant impact on the daily situation of the Sahelian populations. To that extent, without the re-establishment of state services and authorities in the entirety of the region, and without the will to provide a solution to the raging inter-ethnic conflict, the French strategy of containing the jihadist insurgency to a reduced level of intensity in a certain zone was doomed

to fail. Those jihadist groups would bypass the French forces, hiding behind a hostile and abandoned population, taking profit from the absence of the Sahelian states and their deficient governance to rebuild their ranks and their strongholds, condemning the French Armed Forces to a never-ending and costly war in the Sahel.

In conclusion, it can be considered that while the limited capabilities deployed on the ground, the drawbacks of the ‘Sahelisation’ and ‘Europeanisation’ as well as of the ‘3D’ strategy had the combined effect of rendering Operation *Barkhane* in-viable in the long term, the dichotomy of interests between Paris and the Sahelian regimes was the over-arching pre-condition for those three main limitations, in the sense that they may not have emerged without this pre-condition.

5. In-viability of Operation Barkhane and its consequences.

As seen in the last component, the interlinked long-term limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel rendered its military component, Operation *Barkhane*, in-viable in the long term because unable to achieve its objectives. During the sequencing component, it was observed that at the end of the initial phase, Operation *Barkhane* in its initial form was unable to prevent the security situation from deteriorating at a rapid pace in the zone between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. This dramatic situation was perceived in the domain of loss by Paris, as it could have endangered the progress achieved since 2013 in the Sahel and called for a ‘troop surge’ and the return to intensive actions that proved costly for France.

By 2021, there is the certainty that in its current form, the continuation of Operation *Barkhane* would not only not achieve gains, but also lead to further losses. Because Operation *Barkhane* took place under the specific constraints identified in this investigation, it could not prevent this process of jihadist groups’ ‘evasion’ (from a specific zone) and reconstruction (in another zone) from happening. As such, and as observed earlier, the operation was successful in maintaining violence at a certain level, but as soon as the jihadist groups would attack in another

zone, that would require new intensive combat actions, costly in lives, material and money. The losses were also present in another dimension, the one of domestic politics, where the popularity of Operation *Barkhane* was diminishing at a rapid pace.

The in-viability of Operation *Barkhane* due to those limitations was known by the French decision-makers. French President Emmanuel Macron had called times and again for a ‘civil and political awakening’ in the Sahel as the military element was only a part of the solution in the Sahel (Élysée, 2021a; 2021b; France Diplomacy, 2020). Importantly, after the ‘troop surge’ of 2020, the ‘civil and political awakening’ was a pre-condition for continuing French support to the Sahelian states (France Diplomacy, 2020). The lack of will from the Sahelian states to start the reforms and the return of state authorities and services as well as the endemic corruption of the political elites and the impact it has on the conflict have been timidly but constantly decried by Paris in the two last years of the operation (Vie Publique, 2021b). But the ‘civil and political awakening’ remained a hypothesis rather than a reality. By June 2021, in the words of French President Emmanuel Macron, French forces were still unable to “[...] secure certain areas because some states simply refuse to assume their duties” (Élysée, 2021b).

The understanding that Operation *Barkhane* was in-viable must have emerged earlier in the military circles. Indeed, as said earlier, a reflection on its future and its foreseen transformation was organised as early as 2019 to determine what were the possible alternatives according to CEMA Général Lecointre (Le Figaro, 2021). The fact that there is not much more information on that subject before 2023 is not surprising. The French Armed Forces are known for their mediatic restraint during their operations (the French Armed Forces are nicknamed ‘*la grande muette*’, or ‘the great dumb’). Nevertheless, officials speaking publicly since then have highlighted that their ally was “deficient at best, or worst uncooperative”, rendering any progress in the Sahelian conflict impossible (Mugnier, 2023). Colonel Michel Goya, although a commissioned officer during the operation, asserted that Paris was “fighting the symptoms but not the causes”, as those were not in zones of crisis “but rather in Bamako” (Sénat, 2023, p. 15).

In light of the French interests in the Sahel, of its national capabilities and the situation in 2020-2021, there were a few available options for a policy change concerning Operation *Barkhane*. The first two bring a significant level of risk. Paris could have withdrawn its troops at once in the short term, moving those back to France or its bases in Africa, in Gabon, Côte d'Ivoire, and Chad. This option was perceived as un-viable and un-adapted. Paris recognised that its presence was still needed to prevent any new 'cataclysmic collapse' of the Sahelian armies like the one of Mali in 2012 (Élysée, 2021a). A collapse of security in the region and a new bastion for jihadist groups in the region would have endangered the stability of West Africa, where there are significant French interests as well as potentially the security of Europe. To the same extent, the French forces were in the Sahel on the demand of the Sahelian states, leaving those could have been perceived as treason and an abandonment of its allies (Vie Publique, 2021b). In the end, a full withdrawal would have threatened the progress in terms of development, security and cooperation achieved in the 7 years of operation and could thus be considered risky.

The second option is a significant troop and capability 'surge', doubling down once again to strike a decisive blow against the jihadist groups, buying more time for the reforms of the Sahelian states and the reconstruction of their armies. Yet, as it has been the case in 2020 during the 'troop surge', this would increase the violence and the sustained casualties in the short term. In addition, there would be no guarantees that the Sahelian nations would indeed reform or reinforce their authority in the 'zone of crisis', and to the same extent that their security forces would be sufficiently strengthened to deal with the jihadist groups alone in the long-term. This might have solved one limitation of Operation *Barkhane* but there was a high probability that it would fail to solve the others. This would go in direct opposition to the 'Sahelisation' initiative and the idea that the conflict is before all a 'Sahelian issue' that needs a 'Sahelian solution'. Furthermore, the availability of additional troops to send to the Sahel is another important interrogation. As of 2021, the French Armed Forces were stretched thin in multiple missions, in Africa, the Middle East, Europe and even in France with the burden of Operation *Sentinelle*

(several thousand soldiers deployed in cities to protect the population and patrol against the threat of a terrorist attack) (Sénat, 2023, p. 24).

The third option, phasing out Operation *Barkhane* in an organised and limited withdrawal, brings several advantages. In terms of signalling to the Sahelian capitals, it gives the image that Paris will not abandon them but that they need to make the expected efforts in terms of defence, security and reconstruction of state authority (Élysée, 2021a). It reduces the burden on the French Armed Forces, reducing their number in the Sahel and their scope: from now on, they will support the Sahelian forces in their fight against jihadist groups, but they will not conduct this fight alone at a large scale (Assemblée Nationale, 2021b). Also, it would reduce the probability of casualties and political exposition of the French Armed Forces, which had started to be opposed by some in the Sahelian capitals. In the meantime, it would also be a minimal loss, as the jihadist groups were weakened but still active in the region at the time of the decision. Likewise, there were still no guarantees that the Sahelian nations would indeed reform or reinforce their authority in the ‘zone of crisis’ in the long term. Yet, this time, the French forces would still be there to support them and not to supplement them (Assemblée Nationale, 2021b).

All three of those options were evaluated in light of the limitations described earlier of the French strategy in the Sahel that had constrained Operation *Barkhane*, rendering it in-viable in the long term. None of the options would have ‘escaped’ those limitations, and the two advocating for a radical increase or decrease of the French involvement bring a high probability of losses in all dimensions rather than gains. The only viable option with a significant probability to cut the minimal losses of 2021 was the third, the end of Operation *Barkhane* through an organised and limited withdrawal, followed by a long-term reduced commitment for the security in the Sahel. According to CEMA Général Lecointre, this was the option favoured by the Armed Forces (Le Figaro, 2021). This was the option chosen in June-July 2021, as French President Emmanuel Macron set the course of action for an end of Operation *Barkhane* in 2022 (Élysée, 2021a; Élysée, 2021b).

VI. Conclusion.

1. Findings.

This investigation aimed to explain the French leadership's decision to put an end to Operation *Barkhane* in 2022 despite unachieved objectives and persistent French interests in the Sahel. The literature review explored the reasons behind the French intervention in the Sahel, how Operation *Barkhane* came to be, and under which framework. The literature review also highlighted the different limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel as well as other possible explanations for the decision to end Operation *Barkhane*.

This study tried to establish if the conjunction of limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel can explain the decision to put an end to Operation *Barkhane* in 2022. To that extent, the prospect theory of foreign policy decision-making is applied to explain the French leadership's perception of its situation and the probability of achieving losses or gains, the subsequent need to change course and the choice of the option of a planned withdrawal and end of Operation *Barkhane*. Process tracing is here used to test the causal force of the gathered evidence on the studied outcome and to verify the sequence of causal mechanisms leading to the end of Operation *Barkhane*.

In the analysis, the causal connection between the independent variable (X), the combined limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel and the outcome (Y) were indirect. Indeed, the independent variable (X) has a causal force on the perception that Operation *Barkhane* was in-viable as a policy, but not directly on the decision to end it in 2022 (Y). In this study, it was assessed that is the in-viability of Operation *Barkhane* that led to its end. It thus uncover a causal chain of events, as the independent variable (X) transmits causal force to an intervening (in the sense of intermediary) variable (M), the in-viability of Operation *Barkhane*, and the subsequent process of foreign-policy decision-making that resulted with the outcome (Y).

Since the independent variable (X) in this study cannot be directly linked to the outcome(Y), as causal force is passed between the two through the intervening variables (M),

both the double-decisive and smoking gun tests seem out of reach for the hypothesis. Rather, a hoop test is more adequate to test the hypothesis, as (X) can account for (M), and (M) can explain the outcome (Y) studied in this investigation. This study utilizes the ‘outcome explanation’ variant of process tracing, and as such the theory should relate to the empirical evidence, confirming the presence of a causal mechanism at play between (X) and (Y). Under those elements, to pass the hoop test, it should be verified if (X) is a precondition to (M) and if (M) can provide a sufficient minimal explanation for the outcome (Y).

The combined limitations of the French strategy were without a doubt precondition for the in-viability of Operation *Barkhane* and the opening of the process of foreign-policy change. The lack of capabilities, the drawbacks of the ‘Europeanisation’ and ‘Sahelisation’ process and the lack of effectiveness of the ‘3D’ strategy would by themselves explain much of the constraints on the abilities of Operation *Barkhane*. The French Armed Forces deployed in the operation were a capable force, but they were still not enough to prevent jihadist groups from escaping and rebuilding elsewhere, in a region the size of Western Europe. To understand this, one should attempt to visualise 2000 men to control a zone the size of Portugal (if not two times the size of Portugal). The words of CEMA Général Lecointre on that aspect are most telling, “it’s derisory” (Assemblée Nationale, 2019, p. 24).

After 7 years of conflict, the French army was still the only European force directly involved in combat operations in the Sahel, and the Sahelian armies performed badly (both in terms of combat abilities and ethics) even after years of training. Likewise, the unanswered lack of development aid in the zone of crisis pushed local populations in remote areas to deal with or directly support the jihadist groups since they did not have other viable alternatives, thus reducing much of the efforts made to limit the contact between those populations and the jihadist groups.

What ‘doomed’ its viability was the dichotomy of interests between Paris and the Sahelian capitals. The lack of capabilities of Operation *Barkhane*, the drawbacks of the ‘Europeanisation’ and ‘Sahelisation’ process, and the lack of effectiveness of the ‘3D’ strategy had their impact reinforced by this situation of dichotomy. It is also the element that impacted the

most the perception of Operation *Barkhane*'s in-viability and the certainty that it will not succeed nor maintain the situation in the domain of gains. To a lesser extent, the combined limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel also had an impact on the perception of the different options during the process of policy change, more precisely the probabilities of achieving gains or losses with each of the options. As such, it is confirmed that (X) was the pre-condition for (M) to happen. Next, it is verified if (M) provides a sufficient minimal explanation for the outcome (Y).

The causal relationship between (M) and the outcome (Y) is verified through the sequence of stages leading to the decision to end Operation *Barkhane* by 2022 through a partial and limited withdrawal from the Sahelian Saharan strip, a decision made in June-July 2021. The initial stage (between 2014 and January 2020) put into light most of the limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel and their impact on the viability of Operation *Barkhane* to fight efficiently against the jihadist groups. In the first stage, there is the confirmation that Operation *Barkhane* in its current form would entail more losses than gains in the long-term. The escalation of violence in 2019-2020, the troop 'surge' and casualties sustained by the French forces to 'extinguish the fire', and the reaction of the French public opinion are a visible demonstration of this element. In the second stage, the different options available to replace Operation *Barkhane* were assessed while the situation on the ground remained tense. The year 2020 and its 'call for civic awakening' had not provided a solution to the lack of viability of the operation. By June-July 2021, the French leadership chose the less risky and most advantageous option, as it enabled cutting the minimal losses endured during 2020 and 2021 without risking the progress made in the Sahel in the years prior.

This option was the phasing out of Operation *Barkhane*, planned to end in the first months of 2022, to be replaced by the Task Force Takuba with a strong French component and French SOF units supporting the Sahelian armies in their fight against jihadist groups. In the last phase, this partial and limited withdrawal is organised, and the accelerated as the diplomatic relationship between Paris and Bamako first, then Paris and Ouagadougou fall apart. The arrival of Wagner in December 2021 and the subsequent French total withdrawal from Mali in February 2022,

although not planned in the summer of 2021, led to a faster reduction of French staffing in the Sahel. In November 2022, while Operation *Barkhane* should have been phased out earlier, French President Emmanuel Macron officially terminated it.

As such, Operation *Barkhane*'s in-viability due to the combined limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel is what led to the foreign-policy decision-making process to replace it. This process, as the same combined limitations impacted the perception of the different options available, would lead to the decision to end Operation *Barkhane* in 2022. Hence, (M) provides a sufficient minimal explanation for the outcome (Y). To the same extent, it can be concluded that (X) has explanatory power on the outcome (Y) through the intervening variable (M).

As such, the hoop test is passed. The hypothesis guiding this study, that the long-term limitations of the French regional strategy applied to the conflict in the Sahel had a significant impact on the decision to end Operation *Barkhane* in 2022, is thus strengthened by this successful hoop test, but it does disqualify other possible explanations. Finally, an answer can be provided to the research question, which is *how did the aggregation of long-term limitations of the French regional strategy applied to the conflict in the Sahel impact the decision to end Operation Barkhane in 2022?* The aggregation of long-term limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel led to the in-viability of Operation *Barkhane* as it constrained its effectiveness or its ability to achieve its objectives. This in-viability forced Paris to consider other options to replace the operation as it was perceived as costly to maintain (in terms of gains and losses). The only viable option that would enable Paris to retain some control over the fight against jihadist groups in the Sahel without risking the collapse of the security situation or increased losses was the planned and limited withdrawal, with a planned end of Operation *Barkhane* in the first months of 2022, a decision acted on in June-July 2021.

2. Contribution to International Security Studies.

This study aimed primarily to provide new elements and new arguments to the academic discussion on the end of Operation *Barkhane* in 2022. It did so by bringing a new explanation for the end of this chapter of French military interventions in Africa. This investigation should be understood in the context of the French involvement on the African continent, discussed at great length in the initial part of the literature review. As such, one should also see through this study the part Operation *Barkhane* played in this greater historical account and how its end testifies to the evolution of the French presence on the continent. It built on the numerous contributions of the academic literature that had already highlighted this possible relation. Yet, none had especially concentrated on the relationship between the aggregation of limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel and the decision to end Operation *Barkhane* in 2022 to that effect. To that extent, it fills the gap identified in the literature. To the same extent, it can be said that the main contribution made by this investigation is to the sub-field of Contemporary French Security Studies, as it uncovers a relationship that may very well be present in other interventions conducted by Paris in the past or still in activity.

It also put forward a new piece of research on policy change utilising prospect theory. The study of policy change still suffers from the limited number of research done on political and military withdrawal, a complicated issue with a restrained number of cases to study. This paper utilised all the relevant knowledge contained in previous studies of that particular matter to build a convincing explanation for the end of Operation *Barkhane*. To a lesser extent, it also points out the relevance of prospect theory to explaining foreign-policy decision-making and its outcomes, an approach often criticised as explained in the analytical component of this paper.

3. Openings for further investigations.

As stated earlier in this study, the combined long-term limitations of the French strategy in the Sahel provide a sufficient minimal explanation for the decision to end Operation *Barkhane* in 2022. Other hypotheses may have explanatory power for the realisation of that particular outcome. Although this element was partially approached during the analysis, an important task

would be to understand the extent of the impact each of the long-term limitations had on the outcome rather than the aggregation of those same limitations. The extent of the impact that the dichotomy of interest between Paris and the Sahelian regimes had is of particular interest for the understanding of the end of the French operation. Similarly, the impact of the anti-French informational campaign waged by Russia on the outcome is another significant element that needs clarification, even more so in the current international context. To the same extent, the perception of a possible conflict in Ukraine in 2021-2022 may have had an impact on how the French leadership perceived its options by the end of 2021 and as Wagner deployed in Mali. Such a hypothesis would without a doubt justify further work once the primary sources are available.

Even though there are few studies on the political choice to withdraw from a particular intervention, this investigation would benefit from a comparison with other cases. The US administration's choice to withdraw from Afghanistan, under somewhat similar circumstances between early 2020 and January 2021, may present a great case to perform such a comparison. The field of policy change studies would benefit from such investigation, as it would permit building an inter-case definition of the modalities that lead to this type of policy change. Another related case to conduct a comparison could be the end of Operation *Sangaris*, which was terminated in 2016 and presented similar limitations to the ones of Operation *Barkhane*. Such a study would permit scholars to study how the same limitations encountered by Paris led to an akin or different outcome in a unique context. There is still much to be accomplished in the sub-field of Contemporary French Security Studies.

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