

December 12, 2019

SAHEL G-5 UPDATE

Aftermath of the military debacle at Inates (Niger)

A fortnight ago, we predicted that the loss of 13 French soldiers in an operation in northern Mali would “exact a significant toll on political support for the Barkhane mission back in France”¹. This might have been **an understatement, judging from President Macron’s remarkable sortie** during a press conference on the sidelines of the recent NATO summit in London.

1) Responding to a question about the apparent hostility of local opinion towards Opération Barkhane, Mr. Macron demanded **an unequivocal public statement of support for the mission from the five Sahelian governments as a condition for maintaining the mission**².

While the choice of forum was unusual, it was not in the least surprising to see the French president throw down the gauntlet in this fashion³. What was astonishing was the fact that the impulsive Macron chose to follow up his challenge with **a peremptory ‘invitation’ to the five heads of state, to attend an event at Pau**⁴ where they would er, have an opportunity’ to state their position⁵.

2) Talk about tone-deaf: **the quasi-imperial summons seemed almost designed to inflame public opinion** in the G-5. Indeed, President Roch Marc Kaboré of Burkina Faso felt obliged to point out that, « **La forme et le contenu ont manqué de tact** »⁶, while his Chadian counterpart Idriss Déby laconically advised that he would be unable to attend the Pau ‘summit’ - on account of an unspecified prior commitment.

3) And, as if the political climate in Mali were not already fraught enough, it was during this same period that the head of the MINUSMA mission committed **a faux-pas guaranteed to antagonize even the most ardent Francophile**. As an observer at the December 4th Congress of the Mouvement national pour la libération de l’Azawad⁷, held in Kidal⁸, the French national took the floor, and uttered the inexcusable: « **L’idéologie du mouvement (MNL) unit une grande partie de la société civile à Kidal.** »⁹

Christophe Sivillon was declared persona non grata on Dec. 10th and given 24 hours to leave the country.

4) The coup de grâce for Mr. Macron’s summit came two days later. Following Tuesday night’s devastating jihadi attack on the army base at Inates¹⁰ in which 71 Nigérien soldiers were killed, President Mahamadou Issoufou indicated that he would not be travelling to France. Staring diplomatic disaster in the face, **the Elysée wasted no time postponing the ill-conceived Pau forum “until early 2020”** – a time-frame that one can easily see slipping into *sine die* territory.

In the mean time, Mr. Macron is due to visit Côte d’Ivoire - Paris’ crown jewel - between Dec. 20th and 22nd.

¹ See “[Implications of the Ménaka Helicopter Crash](#)”, Nov. 27, 2019.

² « **Souhaitent-ils notre présence et ont-ils besoin de nous ? Je veux des réponses claires et assumées sur ces questions.** »

³ As will be recalled, over the last 3 years France’s consistent response to carping over the CFA’s peg to the Euro has been to call member states’ bluff.

⁴ The majority of the French casualties in the Nov. 27th operation were members of the 5^e régiment d’hélicoptères de combat (5^e RHC), which is based in Pau (Pyrénées-Atlantiques).

⁵ « **C’est la raison pour laquelle j’ai invité à Pau le 16 décembre prochain les cinq chefs d’Etat africains impliqués dans le G5 Sahel, pour pouvoir apporter des réponses précises sur ces points; leurs réponses sont aujourd’hui une condition nécessaire à notre maintien.** »

⁶ I.e. During a National Day interview conducted jointly by Radiodiffusion télévision (RTB télé et radio) and Canal 3.

⁷ The Tuareg separatist movement whose insurrection in December 2011 paved the way for the take-over of two-thirds of Mali’s national territory by a troika of jihadi organizations: Ansar Eddine, AQIM and MUJAO.

⁸ The first provincial capital overrun during the insurrection of 2011-13. Crucially, even after the (French) Force Serval had routed the Islamist guerrillas, it prevented the national army from even entering the province – ostensibly to prevent an anti-Tuareg bloodbath.

⁹ He had already put his foot in it by noting the presence of delegates arriving ‘**from Mali and abroad**’. The innocuous sounding phrase carries the implicit suggestion that Kidal no longer falls within the national territory – total anathema for the vast majority of Malians.

¹⁰ Located a mere 5 km, from the Malian border, this garrison had lost 18 soldiers in a jihadi assault last July. The two attacks were probably launched by Nusrat al-Islam (Groupe de soutien à l'Islam et aux Mussulmans), the organization created by Iyad ag Ghaly from an amalgam of Ansar Eddine, Al-Mourabitoun, MUJAO and the *Katiba* Macina.

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