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SOF, THE SAHEL AND THE AFRICAN
PEACE AND SECURITY ARCHITECTURE.
SYNERGIES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR A
NEW MISSION

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SOF, THE SAHEL AND THE AFRICAN PEACE AND SECURITY ARCHITECTURE. SYNERGIES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR A NEW MISSION

Abstract:

The instability in the Sahel region is currently an undeniable threat for the security of Europe. The features of the theatre and the hybrid nature of this threat turn the special operation forces (SOF) into a particularly useful tool in their three main tasks: intelligence gathering, direct action and training of allied forces.

The preponderant role of the SOF has been proven in Mali, but it is time to step forward in the much needed security sector reform at region level. In this framework, and according to the goals of the African Peace and Security Architecture, it may be apply for a new and more specific EUTM aimed to African SOF and a new center of excellence similar to those of other specialties.

Keywords:

African Standby Force, EUTM, ECOWAS, Sahel, special operations.

***NOTE:** The authors are responsible for the ideas contained in the *Documents of Opinion* which do not necessarily reflect the views of the IEEE (Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies) or the Ministry of Defense.

INTRODUCTION

As long as western conventional forces see their strength and budgets shrink, SOF are going through an expansion era. France decided in its Law of Military Programming 2014-2019 and in an extensive report to Senate, to increase the strength of the COS¹ by one third after the experience in Mali and other theatres. In Spain, the Chief of Joint Staff cited special operations as one of his three great priorities beside military intelligence and cyberdefence. Since 2009 there is a NATO Special Forces Headquarters in Mons and in 2011 the head of the USSOCOM² threw the concept of a Worldwide SOF Network.

There is no need to insist on the hybrid and asymmetrical nature of the threats in the Sahel. The Operation Serval in 2014 meant the biggest engagement ever for the COS with about 500 troops, one sixth of its strength, assigned to the Sabre Task Force. Such effort and its outcome prove that SOF are the ideal tool for the Sahel crisis.

Needless to insist either on that a regional threat calls for a response at the same level. And although just Mali holds a EUTM, some neighbor countries also need a radical SSR³. Moreover, the major military powers of the region, Morocco and Algeria, refuse to collaborate and are restraint, the first because of its non-membership of the African Union (AU) and the latter by its constitutional prohibition of deploying troops abroad.

The development of sound SOF has turned into a basic part of the SSR that the whole region needs. So is understood by the European Union (EU) and Spain, which assumed this responsibility within the framework of EUTM Mali. A real SSR at region level seems for the time being a goal out of range, and however there is since some time ago the legal basis that would enable it.

CONVERGENT STRATEGIES IN THE SAHEL

By early 2011 the EU adopted the Strategy of Security and Development for the Sahel. In that paper it was recognized that most countries in the region required a SSR more than the usual train and equip programs. It also located the core of the problem in Mauritania, Mali, Niger and determined areas of Chad and Burkina Fasso.

In a quick reading we can see that Title 3 is dedicated to “Mutual interests in improving the security and development situation in the Sahel”; that Title 4, focused on the goals, adopts a “5/10 years perspective: enhancing political stability, security, good governance, social

¹ *Commandement d'Opérations Spéciales*, France's Special Operations Command.

² United States Special Operations Command.

³ Security Sector Reform.

cohesion in the Sahel” and set up the conditions for its sustainment; and that the “EU will need to promote and encourage actively African responsibility and ownership, particularly of the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to demonstrate focus, urgency, pragmatism and political engagement, along with flexibility and a requirement to coordinate with other players, such as the Arab League and the Arab Maghreb Union, as well as other bilateral and multilateral partners with an interest in the region, including the UN⁴, United States, Canada and Japan and the Maghreb countries (Algeria, Libya and Morocco).”

On the other hand, are cited as strategic lines of action in Title 7 the “to strengthen the capacities of the security, law enforcement and the rule of law sectors to fight threats and handle terrorism and organized crime in a more efficient and specialized manner”.

Regarding the AU, there is a Strategy for the Sahel Region whose pillars are security, governance and development. Such strategy asks for mid and long-term action beyond the current crisis and welcomes the commitment of the EU and the UN, but entitles the AU as “the organization that can very legitimately provide an overall umbrella for the regional initiatives in the Sahel”. The paper concurs with the European strategy in the location of the geographical core of the Sahel crisis and cites the efforts of these countries in setting joint structures for fighting terrorism and organized crime.

The Titles 31-33 state that “Given the particularity of the Sahel-Saharan zone, it is appropriate to consider to what extent the APSA⁵ could be applied to meet the security challenges of the region. In this perspective, the AU could [...] contribute to the implementation of the ECOWAS Strategy to fight against terrorism [...], deploy SSR experts in the countries that express the need” and “share the experiences of African countries that have undergone or implemented a successful SSR program”.

From all above it can be distilled that the EU and the AU concur on the need of a region-level, long-term and open to third parts SSR, and that this reform must be implemented in coordination with ECOWAS and consistently with APSA goals.

A EUTM SAHEL?

Once recognized the legal basis and the need of a EUTM Sahel, it is time to face the facts. Although EUTM Mali may be considered successful, the current economy situation makes impossible in the short term to replay the model in Mauritania, Niger, Chad and Burkina Fasso. And despite the financing problems are to be considered bellow this paper, the

⁴ United Nations.

⁵ African Peace and Security Architecture.

military shortages of these countries would increase the deployment costs up to make the project unviable for the Africans without a great external support.

Seeking a more viable solution, the answer may be giving priority to a specific tool and set a region-wide EUTM focused on SOF. Few countries of the region have units of this kind capable of facing a threat like that of the Sahel. However, the cases of Angola and South Africa prove that it is possible by harnessing good equipment and rigorous training with the skills of native personnel.

Moreover, in order to optimize results and integrate that EUTM (SOF) Sahel in the APSA goals, such mission could be combined with the establishing of a Centre of Excellence for Special Forces. In fact, the AU has 22 centres of excellence ranging from logistics to language learning, but no one specifically devoted to this area until now. This centre of excellence could operate in a similar way to the NATO Special Forces Headquarters in Mons and become, more than a headquarters, a dynamic element for the African Standby Force. So, it could get to provide the Member States with training, advice, a headquarters for special operations, a study group for constant feedback in techniques and equipment, an exchange forum and eventually the integration in a worldwide SOF network.

Potentialities are obvious, but there is a harsh way between the idea and the fact and it is convenient to know who can pave it and how.

The African funding

The Peace Fund is established as one of the key pillars of the African Peace and Security Architecture and it is meant to provide the necessary financial resources for peace support missions and other operational related activities. The Peace Fund is made up of financial appropriations from the regular budget of AU, including arrears of contributions, voluntary contributions from Member States and from other sources within Africa, including the private sector, civil society and individuals, as well as through appropriate fund raising activities. The Chairperson of the Commission can also raise and accept voluntary contributions from sources outside Africa, which opens the possibility of funding by foreign donors.

The truth is that the Peace Fund remains small and precarious. On average, only 6 percent of the regular budget is allocated to the Peace Fund, and the APSA (and therefore the African Standby Force) remains heavily dependent on external aid, mainly North-American and European. Let us stop to analyze this latter part.

The North-American and European funding

United States is one of the greatest donors for missions in Africa, providing about 26% of the UN budget for peace operations. It also gives a significant support in logistics and technical assistance, as for example the AMISOM rotations and the payment of MINUSMA salaries.

Canada is a wide spectrum bilateral donor, mainly in training for military and police personnel in centers like Pearson. It also provides equipment, logistics and financial support at US-equivalent levels and close to EU in missions like Darfur. UN is not a donor, but it does supply technical assistance and influenced the African Standby Force initial concept.

France has made a remarkable effort to adapt its significant military presence in Africa to the APSA parameters, focusing first on regional organizations like ECOWAS and later on the AU. Its series of interventions and weapons and material donations place France as the most committed European partner to the security in Sub-Saharan Africa. It also tried to “Europeanize” the support to ASF, shifting its RECAMP⁶ program to EU level and involving the EU in centres of excellence of interest for France. Its contribution to the APSA exceeds 90 million Euros.

United Kingdom connected all national effort in a single multi-ministry strategy funded by the Africa Conflict Prevention Pool with 30 million pounds a year. The ACCP provides funding to activities ranging from military advice to exercises. A key area of the British support is training in centers like Karen in Kenya or Kofi Annan in Ghana.

Germany provides 9% of the UN peacekeeping budget and 24% of the EU budget to support Africa. Its main focus is police and military capacity building through the *Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit*⁷.

The *Danish Task Force Africa* is empowered to coordinate all Danish efforts with those of other countries in support of the APSA. Its contribution in 2010 was close to 2 million euros.

Italy channels most of its contribution (about 40 million Euros) to the AMISOM, although also participate in EUTM Mali with instructors for armored vehicles and air systems guidance. It also holds the Centre of Excellence for Police Units in Vicenza with North-American support.

Spain seems to recognize Africa as its main operations theatre in the coming years, but is more prone to channel its support through the EU. It donated unilaterally in 2010 7.300.000

⁶ *Renforcement des Capacités Africaines de Maintien de la Paix* or Reinforcement of African Peacekeeping Capacities.

⁷ Society of International Cooperation.

Euros for the APSA. It recently took command of EUTM Mali and assumed the training of Cape Vert Special Forces.

The EU, with over 300 million Euros for the 2008-2014 period, is an essential donor apart of its Member States, specially from the African Peace Center established en 2004. The center provided the AU and the regional organizations with a basic funding source for peace operations, and the EU with a prominent position in capacity building through financial support.

Specifically, EUTM Mali taught the EU some valuable lessons that it is right to review

Some lessons from EUTM Mali

The calculation of the reference figure for the budget was done with the available information and under a determined hypothesis. It was not possible to deploy the boot camp in Markala, as foreseen. It was necessary to add a solid EU Protection Force and the MEDEVAC⁸ capacity had to be outsourced.

In some areas there was an “over-offer” of capabilities from the Member States, while in others there were delays or even vacuums. And although the Athena mechanism revealed more flexible than NATO procedures, its methods and fundamentals call for a more agile adaptation to the operational framework, like those of UN and AU. In 2004 it was decided that the Athena mechanism would dispose of a budget from contributions of the Member States proportional to their Gross National Product⁹.

It was finally agreed a 24, 7 million budget for a 15 month period between 2013 and 2014, twice the initial figure. An enlargement of the common basis funded by Athena would achieve a more balanced distribution of the financial burden and promote the participation of more Member States. At any rate, the absence of military operations in the EU budget and the weak figure of 56 million Euros raised by Athena are not an acceptable situation.

Regarding the task assignment, it was set an area specialization by which Spain assumed (among others) the SOF training, despite the French advantage. An eventual EUTM (SOF) Sahel would call for allocating more personnel with a wider participation basis.

The equipment

An obstacle for EUTM Mali was the prohibition to equip the local forces, even at the most basic level, due to its training nature. A clearing house cell was activated at the EU Military Staff to coordinate offers and demands of military equipment. This compensation mechanism on bilateral agreement between host nation and donor may channel the

⁸ Medical Evacuation.

⁹ The budget in 2013 for military operations was 56M Euros with 7,95% supplied by Spain.

donations, but it is not enough to cover the demand. Not to mention if it is intended coordination at region level with ECOWAS, although by sticking to SOF area, figures are expected to be lower.

A trust fund on EU credits, donations from Member States, international organizations or third countries at disposition of the mission commander would allow covering the most urgent equipment needs.

The place

Given the time and fund limitations, it would be advisable to set that excellence (and training) centre in pre-existent premises. The Koulikoro camp would be the most inexpensive option, but insufficient for the qualitative leap that the new mission would mean. Training on European soil would have some technical advantages, but it would also compromise the “africanity” of the project.

Not discarding others, an attractive option would be to use premises of the Commando Training Center of Boughar and those of the School of Special Troops in Biskra, both in Algeria. Algeria owns some of the largest and most skilled SOF in the continent, its commitment with the Sahel crisis is notorious and also holds the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism. Besides, the proximity of both bases to Alger would ease the training in naval special warfare.

THE EUTM (SOF) SAHEL. A QUICK ANALYSIS

No completeness intended, it is time for a brief analysis on the hypothesis of that new mission.

Weaknesses

- The AU lacks a solid funding instrument.
- The EU economic conjuncture hinders the reform of Athena mechanism.
- Little SOF experience in the Sahel region.
- The shortage of means, specially air power, will impede the units to develop their full potential in the whole range of special operations.
- Need of support from third actors, specially for equipment.

Threats

- There is no control on the use of this knowledge. It is not rare that some SOF veterans with no job end up joining armed groups or organized crime.

César Pintado Rodríguez

- There is no control on the use of the units. Traditionally, many governments in the region have used their elite units as presidential guards or in a partisan way.
- The AU strategy warns the Sahel countries against to prioritize bilateral cooperation at the expense of regional/continental and multilateral assistance under the pretext of the sensitivity of the security aspect.
- The recipient governments may think of SOF as surrogates of conventional forces.

Strengths

- Wide legal background.
- Numerous concomitances between the EU and AU strategies for the Sahel, and with APSA goals.
- European drive to the SOF pooling and sharing in operational framework.
- Several EU Member States have experience in training African SOF.
- The EU is a better regarded and placed actor than NATO for a technical assistance mission in the Sahel.
- The EUTM Mali provided a valuable background and training Malian SOF constitutes a “test” for this new mission.
- The NATO Special Forces Headquarters provides a model to work by.
- Foregoing experience of other centres of excellence in the framework of the African Standby Force.
- The assistance and prevention nature of a low-profile EUTM is more assumable for the public opinion than a direct military intervention.

Opportunities

- Well trained and equipped SOF spread throughout the region could exact their own pace in the war, denying the adversary any lasting or safe havens.
- Proximity to the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism would expedite the integration of those SOF in a shared intelligence cycle.
- A Centre of Excellence for Special Forces would get training synergies and could make an important advice and study organ.
- SOF provide a powerful tool against threats like terrorism and organized crime, but experience shows that they also are a great school for officers and enlisted who, after quitting, transmit their techniques and ethos.
- SOF use to be an innovation channel by bringing new skills and kits.
- The location of that centre of excellence in Algeria would benefit from its experience and resources, and revitalize a retarded NARC¹⁰.

¹⁰ North African Regional Capability. Northern component of the African Standby Force formed by Egypt, Tunisia, Lybia, Algeria and Sahara Republic.

César Pintado Rodríguez

- The setting of well-led and coordinated SOF would provide the ESF¹¹ and the ECOWAS with a greater reaction capability face to the rising of jihadism in Western Africa.
- The specificity of the mission would keep the strength level low as long as the host nation supplies the most personnel-demanding services (support tasks, force protection, etc.).
- Possibility of integration in the Worldwide SOF Network proposed by the head of the USSOCOM.
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CONCLUSIONS

Proven the utility of SOF in their three main facets, there is no doubt that they are a priority area in the SSR that the region calls for. On the other hand, their cost-efficiency promotes their reinforcement in a mean-shortage context, although this must never lead to false conclusions. There is nothing like low-cost SOF. However, before getting started with a wide region-level SSR or a SOF-only one, it is necessary to clear some obstacles like tasks assignment and mission funding. Both solutions pass through the enlargement of the common basis and assure a sharing consistent with the capabilities of the partakers.

The roadmap of the African Standby Force concurs in this case of the EU and AU strategies for the Sahel, which provides the administrative channel for the establishment of a Centre of Excellence for Special Forces. This centre, far from being a mere office, must be a headquarters and a school for African SOF, and its mission must go beyond the response to the current threat.

The training of these units in the framework of visits and exercises is no longer enough. It is due a long-term strategy with new resources and training programs that include new skills revealed essential (TCCC¹², CIMIC¹³, languages, FAC¹⁴ and intelligence among others). This qualitative leap will also mean the incorporation of new professional backgrounds. For the trainers as for the trainees, it is necessary a more flexible staff management and develop reserve mechanisms that enable the participation of specialists in crucial areas of expertise¹⁵.

¹¹ ECOWAS Standby Force. Western component of the African Standby Force formed by Ghana, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ivory Coast, Guinea Conakry, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Sierra Leona, Mali, Senegal, Niger, Burkina Faso, Gambia and Cape Vert.

¹² Tactical Combat Casualties Care.

¹³ Civil-Military Cooperation, also known as Civil Affairs.

¹⁴ *Forward Air Control* o Control Aéreo Avanzado.

¹⁵ UK and US have included reservists in their SOF for years. In France, the COS has 400 all-ranks reservists, 150 of them in its staff performing tasks ranging from translation to analysis.

César Pintado Rodríguez

Without high-level SOF it is nearly impossible to face an adversary who does not play the same rules as conventional forces. Giving them the proper training, equipment and leadership must be a priority goal for the APSA, and by extension for the AU. But if the EU leaves the region without performing its task in the pursuit of this goal, it will have lost a great chance to contribute to the Sahel stabilization. And maybe to its very credibility as a global actor.

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