

OPINION

If a Mali mission, then do it for the right reasons

It must be a mission to support regional stability, not just to boost Canada's reputation.

By **CHRIS W. J. ROBERTS**

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Members of the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali from Benin patrol the Kidal airport on Feb. 13, 2016. *UN photograph by Marco Dormino*

CALGARY—Last month, 17 Malian soldiers were killed when three rebel groups conducted a sophisticated attack on an outpost near the Mauritanian border at Nampala.

Nampala sits roughly halfway between the historic northern Malian city of Timbuktu and the capital, Bamako.

This was only the most brazen attack by (mostly) Salafist groups in Mali since the November 2015 attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako where 20 civilians were killed and nearly 200 taken hostage, including Canadians. A few days after the Nampala attack, up to 30 died during clashes between rival militias in Kidal.

Over the last three years, the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has been the most dangerous UN peace operation anywhere. MINUSMA is a large and complex mission comprising over

11,000 troops and police from over 40 countries. A smaller French counter-terrorism mission also operates in the region (Operation Barkhane), and both MINUSMA and the French operate alongside Malian security forces, who in turn receive training and support from a sizable European Union military mission.

Recently, the UN proposed to increase the size and capabilities of MINUSMA. Some of the specific requests, from special forces and intelligence-gathering to staff officers and more air mobility for a quick reaction force, fit precisely into the existing capabilities of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).

While there are concerns about the CAF being overstretched given commitments to the Baltics and the peshmerga in Iraq, the CAF do have the capability to mount a relatively significant and robust operation in Africa. But should the CAF be going (back) to Africa now? And, if so, is Mali the best choice among the nine UN missions on the continent?

There are compelling arguments for an African commitment. Ongoing African security crises have regional and international repercussions. Beyond the obvious problem of Salafist terrorism, which affects Africa more than the Middle East or Europe, mass displacement and economic deterioration undercut both the hope for economic development in Africa and ratchet up the refugee pressures on Europe. Canada has been a free rider in terms of asking other countries to do the heavy lifting in missions across Africa. If peace operations are the duct tape of international security efforts, the world needs more help from the home of Red Green.

However, if participation in an African mission is just a show-the-flag moment to remind the world that “Canada is back,” that is unnecessarily putting Canadians in harm’s way for symbolic reasons. There is already a chorus of critics charging that any African mission is simply a vanity play to support a bid for a seat on the UN Security Council. Done for the wrong reasons and without strategic vision and careful planning, the critics are correct.

But there are reasons why a Mali mission makes sense for Canada. The vast majority of Malians support the international presence (unlike how Libyans would react to foreign forces there). A Muslim-majority country, Mali sits in a bulwark, strategic location in West Africa. Most importantly, unlike Afghanistan before 2002, Canada has a long history of relations with Mali, from development assistance to mining investment. This puts some onus of responsibility on Canada for, at times, not paying full attention to the effects of its policies. Mali’s current crisis is in part a legacy of the intervention in Libya in 2011, as arms and fighters slipped south as Muammar Gaddafi’s regime crumbled. But it is also a legacy of Canadian support for a regime that did not do enough to ameliorate northern grievances before 2012 and likely played a dangerous game of northern power balancing, supporting certain militia groups over others and looking the other way at violence, abuses, and drug trafficking.

Mali, thus, presents a highly complex operating environment, somewhat similar to Afghanistan although those similarities cannot be pushed too far. A comprehensive (beyond just a military component) Canadian effort in Mali must be structured in a way that assists Mali to regain its democratic trajectory (including disarming or integrating various militias), ameliorates the long-standing grievances of those excluded from political and economic systems, and recognizes that a real war is still part of the mission, fought against radical groups seeking to destabilize the entire region. A serious effort will likely require shaking up MINUSMA and frank consultations with Malian politicians, civil servants, army officers, and

others. Canada, given decades of significant presence in Mali, can do this more than most other partners can.

If the government is serious about a Mali mission to support regional stability, and not just to boost Canada's reputation, it will have turned a corner on its strategic thinking about Africa. It will also, however, have to make that case to the Canadian public, which might be more difficult than the mission itself.

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