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Why is the UK going to Mali?

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In one of her last acts as British Defence Secretary, Penny Mordaunt announced 250 troops will be deployed to support the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, but for this to be effective it needs a more coherent strategy for engagement in the Sahel and Africa with clear objectives and resources.

Amidst the flurry of a new British Prime Minister and Cabinet, it was easy to miss the Government's announcement that they are deploying a long-range reconnaissance task group of 250 personnel to Mali in 2020. But it is important. Not only does it represent the most significant contribution of British forces to the frontline of a UN peacekeeping mission since Bosnia, it could also potentially be the most dangerous mission for British forces since Afghanistan – the French military has lost over 24 soldiers since it commenced Operation Barkhane in Mali in 2013.

It also follows a continued commitment from the UK to tackle instability in the Sahel. As Mordaunt notes: "[t]he UK is committed to supporting the international community in combating instability in Mali, as well as strengthening our wider military engagement across the Sahel region." In September 2018, the UK announced its support to Operation Barkhane with the much-lauded deployment of Royal Air Force Chinook helicopters. This is on top of the £49.5 million of funding it has already provided to the UN mission as part of an increased presence in the region. With "new embassies in Niger and Chad and ... a much larger presence in Mali", including around 90 troops already embedded in the various international peace operations and a new Defence Attaché position.

This support is part of the UK's new approach to Africa. In a speech in Cape Town in August 2018, Theresa May announced that as part of five shifts in the UK's approach, it "will invest more in countries like Mali, Chad and Niger that are waging a battle against terrorism in the Sahel." The reason for this renewed focus is likely to be threefold. It's good for its bilateral relations with France (a priority in recent years, especially since the vote to leave the EU) who already has around 3,500 troops deployed to the country; it demonstrates its commitment to UN peacekeeping missions (strengthening the UK's identity as 'Global Britain'); and builds the British armed forces' reputation as a willing and able partner in the fight against international terrorism. However, it remains unclear how well the UK's broader strategy on the continent can adapt to this shift towards the Sahel.

In her evidence session with the Foreign Affairs Committee in March this year, Harriet Baldwin – the then-Africa Minister – was criticised for her description of the UK's commitments in Africa as a 'strategy'. Instead, Bob Seely suggested it amounted to "effectively a bunch of bullet points." This reflected our own conversations with soldiers on the ground in Kenya and Mali (and those rotating out of Nigeria) in September 2018 last year, who had their own concerns about the strategic direction being provided to soldiers operating on the continent.

One soldier, echoing the views of others, described the UK approach as "throwing some men here and some men there" and felt that "political vacillation" remained a major threat to the effectiveness of the UK's approach. Although there is evidence that efforts are underway to start improving the integration of these strategies, our research found that coordination remained personality-driven rather than institutionalised.

Moreover, it was argued that these activities remained largely "dictated by funding" rather than careful analysis of partners' wants and needs. Many soldiers delivering training courses argued that they did not address the institutional problems which were causing instability in the countries in which they were engaged. One, reflecting the feelings of many more, said: "We just end up training people, sending them out, and never hearing anything again." In Kenya, a number of soldiers argued that UK operations were not "actually [going to] achieve anything." Instead, they suggested that the UK is doing just enough to stop things getting worse or to look like it is doing something.

If not carefully thought through, the UK deployment to the Sahel risks the same, a point British troops are painfully aware of. For example, one soldier in Mali told us that there was a need for "an adult conversation about what [our partners] needs and what we can deliver." He explained that current training missions resembled a builder that "just turned up at your house and started fixing things you hadn't asked for." In some interviews it also appeared that the UK's shift towards the Sahel had not been combined with a more detailed analysis of what among the many and complex problems facing the region was of most importance to the UK. For instance, soldiers complained that they have not been given clear priorities to cover in their situation reports; leading to a situation where they report on everything – despite feeling it is not that useful and may not even be read by personnel based in London.

No doubt the French Government will be pleased that, as part of its efforts to try and rally regional, local and international actors to support its operations in Mali, the UK is committing further resources. But serious questions need to be asked about how to make this contribution effective. For instance, in our conversations with senior officers we were informed that the UK was still trying

to work out what the UK "ask" would be in return for these deployments. And, beyond this, while an extra 250 troops is a significant uplift on what the UK has already committed, it remains small in comparison to larger international and regional efforts - meaning careful consideration is essential to make it effective.

Nor is the Sahel an easy region for the UK to provide automatic added value with this modest commitment. The Sahel is already a complicated space of disparate efforts by international and regional efforts, many of which are facing serious difficulties. Nor is the UK's job made any easier, according to a number of British soldiers already deployed in Mali, owing to the fact the British Army is seriously lacking in proficient French language speakers and has limited operational experience in the Sahel region. Taken together, this could undermine the effectiveness and added value of the British contribution.

Faced with these potential challenges, the UK's deployment must form part of a coherent regional and continent-wide strategy. Indeed, success will be determined by how far the British government is willing to prioritise the activities required to meet its aspirations. Only when bold rhetoric is matched by resources and sustained planning will the UK be able to improve its contribution to peace and stability in the places it intervenes.

Image credit: MINUSMA/Flickr.

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