FRANCE AND THE UNITED STATES IN WESTERN SAHEL: COOPERATION AND COMPETITION IN AN INTERLOCKING CONFLICT

BY

MARCEL KITISSOU

Symposium on Development, Extremism, Security and the State in Africa
Cornell Institute for African Development’s Symposium on
October 28-29, 2016
This symposium is about Extremism, Security, and the State in Africa. In summary it is about war and peace. To quote Yuval Noah Hariri (Sapiens, 2015), the year after 9/11, in 2002, “out of the 57 million dead, 172.000 died in war and 569.000 died of violent crime (a total of 741.000 victims of human violence). In contrast 873.000 people committed suicide. It turns out that, in the years following the 9/11 attacks, despite all the talk of war and terrorism, the average person was more likely to kill himself than to be killed by a terrorist, a soldier or a drug dealer.” And Hariri to conclude: “The decline of violence is due largely to the rise of state” (p. 367). . The rise of state, apparently, makes peace more lucrative and violence less rewarding.

If this year’s empty peace accords in Columbia gain substance, the whole western hemisphere will have no active war. Following the reasoning of Hariri, this should be interpreted as a consolidation of the state in the Americas. But make no mistake. There has never been a real peace in on this planet. Because, real peace implies the improbability of war (Hariri, 2015). But when and where war exists, is it a symptom of the absence of a well functioning state? This presentation proposes, as an answer, a mixture of harmony and clash of interests among local entities taking the state as hostage, an architecture of complexity that becomes a magnet for foreign players with their own values and interests. That is the case in many parts of African.
Compared to other regions in Africa, particularly southern Africa, the Sahel and West Africa are in a relative situation of instability. Economic and security crises are closely related and reinforce each other. Security is needed for successful development policies and development is needed to ensure peaceable societies. As development itself is a potential source of conflict because it tends to create regional disparities and social inequality, this paper argues that the way out of the vicious cycle of mutually reinforcing security and economic crises resides in establishing solid vertical and horizontal political structures (to borrow an expression of Nicolas van de Walle) that can ensure a well-functioning deliberative democracy, focus on the needs of local populations and mitigate normal internal grievances as opposed to becoming a pawn in the geopolitical calculations of foreign powers.
The Sahel in its complexity: The Sahel covers about 3 million square km or 1.1 million square miles. Its population of about 50 million is predicted to double to 100 million in 2020 and to quadruple to 200 million in 2050. Meanwhile, the region experiences recurrent drought. Water is scarce. Due to a combination of drought, political instability and rising food prices, an estimated 18 million people are currently facing food insecurity. These factors constitute a vicious cycle in which the climate worsens human conditions, and resulting human behaviors worsen the climate. Outbreaks of diseases such as dengue fever and cholera are not uncommon.
The sources of instability are complex. They include the effects of climate change. The Sahel is located in the northern part of the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) where climate change has great impact. Christian Parenti, in *Tropics of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* (2011) proposes a trilogy of poverty, severe climate and political violence in which severe climate aggravates both poverty and political violence. Seen on a map, this corridor of conflict (the Sahel) looks like a gigantic dry river, or the trajectory of a bullet, traversing the northern half of the continent from sea to sea.
**Geopolitical Importance:** There are ten countries in total sharing the Sahel: Burkina Faso, Chad, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Sudan, and South Sudan surrounded by important water bodies, close the Mideast, Europe and, across the Atlantic, at the shortest distance between Africa and Latin America. That facilitated slave trade in the past and facilitates drug trafficking at present (“High Way 10,” in Interpol's language).
The region can also claim past glory: the picture on the left represents the story of Mansa Abu Bakr II sailing for "America" in the 14th century, before Christopher Columbus (Ivan van Sertima, *They Came before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America*, 1976). The picture on the right shows his brother and successor, Mansa Musa, sitting on a throne with a nugget of gold in his right hand, as depicted on a 14th century Italian map. According to Kwadwo Sarfoh (*Water and the Development of Africa*, 2016), the longer the river, the bigger the kingdom. Thus, West Africa had bigger kingdoms than southern Africa such as Mali and Ghana. Boko Haram’s so called Caliphate claims the area where the 9th to 19th century kingdom of Kanem Bornu used to be located.
The Tuareg: a border ethnic group: Prominently in the periphery of regional states; people of border zones, known in Africa as having minimal governance; marginalized economically and politically. In addition, there is no more place on the planet for nomadic lifestyles.
The sphere of influence of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) overlaps the Tuareg’s traditional territory.
Sahel: Movements and Routes

Sahara desert area (average annual precipitation less than 200 mm)
Sahel semi-desert area (average annual precipitation 200-600 mm)

Dictator overthrown in 2011
Weak state
Other Sahara-Sahel state
Border conflicts

Energy and mineral resources
- Natural gas and oil reserves and extraction
- Uranium
- Iron
- Gold

Movements
- "Traditional" migration routes
- New migration routes
- Smuggling routes (weapons, tobacco, cannabis, cocaine)
- porous border
- Frontex and Nato surveillance operations

Moroccan/Western Sahara wall
- "Security wall" under construction

Tuareg population
- Tuareg rebellions, attacks by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, January-March 2012
- Movement of arms since the fall of the Libyan regime
- Refugee flight

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operational area
- Assassinations or kidnappings by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) between 2007 and 2011
- Military or police operation against AQIM
- US armed forces presence as part of Pan-Sahel Initiative
- French armed forces presence

About the Tuaregs:
The word Tuareg is for these Berbers what Eskimo (“raw meet eater”) is for the Inuit: pejorative. Tuareg is an Arabic word meaning “abandoned by god.”

The camel spread among most nomad Berbers of the northern Sahara during the 3rd and 4th centuries and became the major form of transport in the desert by the 5th century. For the first time, large scale and regular long distance trading caravans across the Sahara were possible mostly by two principal Berber groups, the Sanhaja in the west and the Tuareg in the central and southern Sahara. This specialization allowed the Tuareg to build a network of alliances far way from their home territory.

As part of the Islamic expansion, it was a largely a Berber Islamic army which crossed the Straits of Gibraltar in 711 and spearheaded the conquest of Spain where they were known as "Moors" (people of Mauritania). Some think of them as the Tuaregs.

In 1912, Le Plan d’Organisation du Sahel identified an administrative and military organization of Central Sahara that included a concept of Tuareg territory. This concept was then extended to the Sahara-Sahel area dominated by the Tuareg. Following the discovery of two important oil fields in Hassi Messaoud and Hassi R’Mel in Algeria in 1956, the plan was essentially designed to separate the oil fields of Algeria from sub-Saharan Africa and create a market for French investments. The conclusion, on March 18, 1962, of the Evian Accords ended the Algerian war. It also ended the L’Organisation Commune des Régions Sahariennes (OCRS) project as well as to the prospect of a Tuareg state (André Bourgeot, ‘Sahara de tous les enjeux,’ in Géopolitique du Sahara, review Herodote, Volume 3, No. 142, 2011: 42-77).
Francophone Africa: it includes the Tuareg territory
French-African Military Agreements and location of strategic resources
Gérard Chaliand (1980) explained the importance of Africa in the geopolitics of the Cold War era, listing resources such as diamond (75%), gold (70%), cobalt (70%), vanadium (50%), platinum (46%), chromium (36%), manganese (30%), copper (20%), uranium (20%) and more of world supplies.

While these resources were essentially concentrated in countries of the southern part of the continent, none of which were colonized by France, gas and oil, phosphates, iron and uranium were located in countries of the Maghreb and western Sahara-Sahel, all of which, except for Libya and Western Sahara, were French possessions. Therefore, the area is of strategic importance for France.

With regard to the United States in the Sahel region, all partners of the Trans-Sahel Counterterrorism Initiative, announced by the G. W. Bush administration in 2005 and continued by the Obama administration as part of the Overseas Contingency Operations, are former French possessions except for Libya and Nigeria.

In addition, western Sahel, where Tuareg irredentism takes place and where the presence of jihadi activists is salient, overlaps with both France’s traditional zone of influence and the US-led coalition of the willing against terrorism. Evidently, the nationalistic agenda of the Movement for the Liberation of Azawad in northern Mali neither coincides with the interests of France nor with the global ambition of al-Qaeda as, similarly, France’s national interests in the region are not in perfect harmony with the objectives, however complimentary, of the United States.
Overlapping France's traditional zone of influence, the area of activity of AQIM and the Tuareg territory.
The U.S. phased out its military bases in North Africa in the 1960s. The general pattern that followed was one in which the U.S. seemed only to respond to crises while Africa disappeared from the Pentagon’s radar screen unless events challenged its primacy in the region.

The landscape completely changed after September 11, 2001, when the East-West competition was replaced by a North-South struggle. In 2002, the US created a combined Joint Task Force for the Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), the Trans-Sahel Counterterrorism Initiative in 2005 and the Africa Command in 2008.
Interlocking conflict: One geographical space, many Sahels

By virtue of history and geography the Sahel, where Tuareg irredentism takes place and where the presence of jihadi activists is salient, overlaps with both France’s traditional zone of influence and the US-led counter-terrorism activities. At the same time, the nationalistic agenda of the Tuareg secular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad coincides with neither the global ambition of al-Qaeda and affiliates nor does France’s national interest in the region perfectly coincide with the objectives, however complimentary, of the Overseas Contingency Operations of the Obama Administration. The combination of activities with a multiplicity of actors has led to an increased militarization of the region.

The interlocking or embedded conflicts (actual or potential) that define the region can be summarized as follows: Tuareg vs. al-Qaeda, Mali-Niger vs. Tuareg, Algeria vs. Qaddafi’s Libya, France vs. US.

Strategic cooperation (actual or potential) includes France and the West (particularly after France's return to all structures of NATO in 2012, after 43 years of hiatus), France and Algeria, Tuareg and diverse Jihadi groups with shifting alliances.
An Epic Combat: Batman vs. Superman? These are the Ancient Egyptian gods Horus and Seth in an eternal combat! The former representing the advancement of the desert, the latter development of human civilization.
A lesson from the Gods: address the issue, not the person

Fighting has been going on in the Sahara-Sahel for hundreds of years. The battle front has been the moving front line between the green and the red, land resources and the desert. Maybe the Ancient Egyptian myth about the fight between Horus and Seth illustrates this better: the hawk headed Horus, the green, defending human civilization and Seth, the red, the god of violence, with the head of a unknown animal, pushing the desert forward. But Gods don't kill Gods. They are immortal. The fight is meant not to eliminate but to induce change in the behavior of the other side. There is s lesson in that.
Conclusion: All politics is local

Sustainable stability can only come from local arrangements not foreign interventions. For border ethnic groups such as the Tuareg to feel part of a national community, deliberative democracy should take roots in individual states in addition to regional cooperation. Models exist for cooperative mechanisms and fora for border ethnic groups: the Akwasasne at the border between the US and Canada is an example. On a larger scale, a mechanism is offered by the Arctic Council composed of eight member states, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the US. The Inuit Circumpolar Council is a permanent participant in the organization for the purpose of consultation with Inuit representatives.

To establish a Pan-Sahel (or Circum-Sahel) Tuareg Council within a regional state organization, France has a unique role to play. It can help with internal negotiations between the Tuareg and their states, within and between countries of the region. It can facilitate regional cooperation within the Sahel and the West African region. And it can promote greater cooperation between countries of the region and North Africa. If, in so doing, and in conformity with Le Discours de la Baule (Mitterrand, 1990), it can promote democratic processes, France will be an even greater actor in the global power play than it is now by military interventions. And so will the Sahara-Sahel and the West Africa region in international politics.