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Continuity Over Change in Canada’s
“Return to Peacekeeping” in Africa**

by Chris W. J. Roberts
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POLICY PAPER

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► **Executive Summary**

Nearly 20 years since its last significant contribution to United Nations (UN) peacekeeping in Africa, Canada deployed an aviation task force to Mali in July 2018 to support MINUSMA for one year. This carefully selected tasking represents continuity in the types of capabilities Canada deploys to UN operations in Africa, stretching back to Suez and the Congo (i.e., mostly enablers, not combat arms). Concurrent debates about whether MINUSMA represents peacekeeping or war-fighting are unhelpful: peacekeeping has not been wholly synonymous with Suez and Cyprus-type missions since Congo in 1960-1964, and particularly not since the end of the Cold War. Many Canadians (politicians and public alike) are distracted by a number of myths around peacekeeping and Africa’s supposed marginality to Canadian security and prosperity. These myths draw attention away from important debates which still need to be held about Canada’s role in multilateral peace support operations and how best to ameliorate African regional security challenges that have direct and indirect consequences for Canada and world order.



In August 2016 the government of Canada announced with great fanfare a “return to peacekeeping”, pledging up to 600 troops and \$450 million to support Peace and Stabilization Operations Programs (PSOPS), though no specific mission commitments were made.¹ Canadian military, political and diplomatic leaders had, however, already telegraphed that would likely mean support to one or more United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions in Africa.² It took nearly two years, but in July 2018 Canada reversed a nearly two-decade turn away from sizeable contributions to UN peacekeeping: it deployed a helicopter task force in support of the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). But from a longer term perspective, the type of capabilities deployed and tasks accepted by Canada follow a well-established pattern for its participation in UN peace support operations (PSOs) in Africa. The continent hosts the vast majority of the more than 90,000 UN peacekeepers deployed globally – mostly in large, dangerous missions, where thousands of armed troops and police are involved in complex civil war peace enforcement and protection of civilian roles. However, the Canadian government was extremely careful to choose a task which leveraged its technical prowess but limited its direct risks.

The Mali mission thus represents deep continuity in Canadian actions and attitudes towards African peace and security that can be traced back to peacekeeping’s origins in 1956 (Suez) and 1960 (Congo). Since those missions, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) has mostly fulfilled critical enabling roles, including transport and logistics, medical, engineering, and command and communications.³ Two major interventionary exceptions to this pattern stand out: Somalia in 1992-1993 and Libya in 2011, when Canadian military power was deployed with relatively robust rules of engagement and capabilities (closely aligned with American and NATO forces respectively), and without local consent.⁴ For anyone paying attention, MINUSMA is hardly equivalent to peacekeeping in Suez or Cyprus.⁵ It is recognized as a deadly UN mission for troop-

¹ Government of Canada, “Canada to Support Peace Operations,” Aug. 26, 2016. <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2016/08/canada-to-support-peace-operations.html> Of course, this pledge followed Liberal Party campaign pledges made during the 2015 election. See Liberal Party of Canada, “Promoting International Peace and Security.” <https://www.liberal.ca/realchange/promoting-international-peace-and-security>

² Bruce Campion-Smith, “Canadian Troops Headed to Africa, Top General Says,” *Toronto Star*, July 14, 2016. <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/07/14/canadian-troops-headed-to-africa-top-general-says.html>; Canadian Press Staff, “Harjit Sajjan Says Canada to Send Military to Africa for a ‘Long Duration’,” *Global News*, Aug. 15, 2016. <https://globalnews.ca/news/2883565/harjit-sajjan-says-canada-to-send-military-to-africa-for-a-long-duration>; John Paul Tasker, “Canada’s Mission in Africa will be Focused on ‘Peacemaking,’” *UN Ambassador Says*,” *CBC*, Aug. 27, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/un-ambassador-peacekeeping-africa-1.3736907>

³ Peacekeeping should be differentiated from earlier, smaller UN observer missions in the Middle East and Kashmir (or Canadian participation in the International Control Commission in Vietnam from 1954). Observer missions were small detachments of (mostly) unarmed troops whose function was to verify and report adherence or violations to specific agreements. In Suez in 1956, for the first time, formed units were deployed in an interpositional manner to keep belligerents apart, though the sheer presence – and not the capabilities of – multilateral UN forces were supposed to be enough to do the job. Very quickly, however, this idealized model of UN peacekeeping broke down in Congo (1960-1964), where UN forces became active belligerents. For a complete review, see Joachim Koops et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴ The UN Security Council (UNSC) authorized the Somalia and Libya missions, but humanitarian intervention under the auspices of UNITAF (Somalia) and under UNSC Resolution 1973 (Libya) were not typical Chapter VI- or VII-type PSOs. The sporadic Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) participation in multilateral anti-piracy patrols off the Horn of Africa from the late 2000s can also be included as another, albeit minor, exception.

⁵ Historian Sean Maloney pointed out long ago that the early years of peacekeeping during the Cold War (Suez, Congo, Cyprus) have been misinterpreted: Canada made significant contributions to these missions due to Cold War security imperatives, including the risks of military escalation leading to nuclear war, or to contain Soviet influence in Africa and NATO’s southern flank. And the shift to stabilization missions after the Cold War (former Yugoslavia, Somalia, etc.), which included combat-type operations, still has not penetrated the Canadian mindset about what peacekeeping often entails. See Sean M. Maloney, “From Myth to Reality Check; From Peacekeeping to Stabilization,” *Policy Options*, September 2005. <http://www.seanmaloney.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/maloneySep05.pdf>



contributing countries (TCCs), with 172 fatalities from malicious and accidental causes between April 2013 and August 2018.⁶ So, for most ordinary Canadians and too many politicians, sending a significant Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) contingent to Mali is confusing. Is Mali a war zone or a peacekeeping mission? The answer is both and neither (an answer that will become clearer by the end of this report). But a focus solely on that semantic question ignores the more fundamental problem: a lack of official Canadian strategic thinking about Africa overall.⁷ This is hardly new to this government, but the ongoing lack of vision and leadership produces legitimate openings for several critiques. It also reduces Canada’s potential for effective contributions to international peace and security at a time of rapid change and uncertainty in global affairs. There are deep political roots to this persistent Canadian ambiguity around African security issues,⁸ and about the overseas employment of the CAF in general.⁹ A recent poll conducted on behalf of the CAF confirms this confusion: 87 per cent of Canadians agree that the CAF should be involved in non-combat support roles for UN and NATO missions compared to 68 per cent support for “ground combat” roles. Yet, 85 per cent of Canadians also agree that the CAF should be involved in “peace support operations” generally, which in reality cover the spectrum of military capabilities.¹⁰ While Canada has considerable discretion to select its overseas military deployments, our NATO security allies – including the United States – and our African development partners want and expect Canadian contributions. Pressure from allies and events on the ground will continue for the foreseeable future. But without a strategic vision or even a basic awareness emanating from within Ottawa to underpin a coherent rationale, the tradition of ambiguity and ad hoc-ness will continue. The “return to peacekeeping” and “whole of government” rhetoric barely conceals this missing strategy. It increases political cleavages at home, reduces Canada’s relevance abroad, limiting its operational effects and thus the chances for Canada to make a lasting contribution to African security and development.

To put the MINUSMA contribution in context, this report proceeds in two parts. The first section zeros in on Canada’s specific contribution to MINUSMA under the auspices of Operation Presence – Mali (or “Op PRESENCE – Mali” in CAF nomenclature, first publicly named on June 28, 2018). What exactly is Canada’s commitment to MINUSMA, with what capability and personnel, for how long and under what kind of risk profile? What were the international pressures and process behind this decision? Why Mali, when there are many other UN PSOs that could use CAF augmentation? And how does Canada’s contribution to MINUSMA reflect a deep continuity with Canadian participation in UN missions on the continent?

⁶ The UN MINUSMA fact sheet (<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma>) provides some up-to-date and historical information, including resolutions and mandates, personnel deployed, major TCCs, annual budgets and fatalities. The official MINUSMA mission website (<https://minusma.unmissions.org/>) includes more current news, press releases and photos.

⁷ Chris W. J. Roberts, “Peace Operations in Africa: Is Canada Making Decisions Before Knowing its Strategy?”, OpenCanada.org Aug. 26, 2016. <https://www.opencanada.org/features/peace-operations-africa-canada-making-decisions-knowing-its-strategy>

⁸ See books by Edward Akuffo, *Canadian Foreign Policy in Africa: Regional Approaches to Peace, Security, and Development* (New York: Routledge, 2012) and David Black, *Canada and Africa in the New Millennium: The Politics of Consistent Inconsistency* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015).

⁹ See David Bercuson, “Why Canadians Pay Little Attention to their Military,” *The Conversation*, Aug. 30, 2018.

<http://theconversation.com/why-canadians-pay-little-attention-to-their-military-101236>

¹⁰ National Defence, Canada, “Views of the Canadian Armed Forces 2018 Tracking Study,” July 4, 2018, 27. http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/pwgsc-tpsgc/por-ef/national_defence/2018/076-17-e/report.pdf



The second part of this report then examines the domestic political and policy aspects of the Mali mission. Should peacekeeping or stabilization missions remain part of Canada’s traditional “forward security” orientation, and if so, when?¹¹ Tracking public and political responses to Canada’s “return to peacekeeping” over the last couple of years illustrates a range of criticisms and concerns. Most are legitimate; some are knee-jerk. The latter reflect a misunderstanding of the evolution of peacekeeping as stabilization or are purely partisan attacks aimed at the current Liberal government, which has no interest in challenging the mythic “Canada as foremost peacekeeper” motif that leaves it open to such attacks. Some refuse to see the merits of Canadian participation in any UN PSO, unless, perhaps, it is entirely a US- or NATO-driven operation. At the extremes, globalism’s spectre dominates, with UN PSOs as just one more step towards UN global dictatorship dominated by

George Soros-backed elites and pedophilia trafficking rings.¹² However, nearly all the debates to date miss that broader strategic requirement for assessing the why, when and how questions about Canadian contributions to UN peacekeeping and, particularly, to African peace and security issues as Africa hosts the largest and most complex missions. But the partisan debates let everyone off the hook: platitudes replace strategic policy analysis, planning and training, cultivation of regional expertise and networks. Both supporters and detractors of the mission rarely move

Operation PRESENCE — Mali

The Canadian Armed Forces is supporting the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

Approximately **250** CAF members

Will conduct medical evacuations and tactical helicopter operations

3 CH-147F Chinooks

24 hours a day

7 days a week

for one year.

5 CH-146 Griffons

Based out of Gao, the CAF joins over 55 MINUSMA partner countries in their efforts to bring stability to Mali.

National Defence / Défense nationale

Figure 1: DND/CAF poster provides details about Aviation Task Force Mali, released July 25, 2018. (Source: @CanadianForces Twitter)

¹¹ See Sean Maloney, “Helpful Fixer or Hired Gun? Why Canada Goes Overseas,” *Policy Options*, January 2001. <http://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/2001-odyssey-espace/helpful-fixer-or-hired-gun-why-canada-goes-overseas>

¹² It takes two seconds to find Canadians on Twitter espousing these extreme views in addition to those from other countries, amplified by the bots and trolls sowing conspiracy theory confusion across social media. These ridiculous conspiracies will not be addressed here but their presence needs to be acknowledged.



beyond talking points to acknowledge or at least debate the salience and implications of African crises for outside actors including Canada.¹³

OPERATION PRESENCE – MALI¹⁴: Military and International Aspects

The Mission in Detail

What exactly has Canada committed to the MINUSMA mission? The central contribution is an aviation task force which provides tactical helicopter support (“forward aeromedical evacuation” or medevac, plus troop transport and logistics) in Sector East (see Appendix 2). Canadian helicopters replaced a joint German-Belgian helicopter detachment, but will be working closely with German and Dutch reconnaissance and intelligence units as well as Bangladeshi, Senegalese and other contingents. Based at – and for those not on flight operations, mostly confined within the wire of – Camp Castor, Gao,¹⁵ the aviation detachment operates two of the Royal Canadian Air Force’s (RCAF) new CH-147H Chinook transport helicopters from 450 Squadron (Petawawa), plus four CH-146 Griffon armed escorts from 408 Squadron (Edmonton). One additional machine of each type is also available in theatre to ensure full operational capability is maintained.¹⁶ Mali is the new Chinook’s first operational deployment overseas, while the Griffons undertook a similar role in Afghanistan. Robust rules of engagement guide the use of force. Given that the RCAF provides core capability for Task Force Mali (as captured in the “Task Force Mali” shoulder patch¹⁷), it is no surprise that the mission’s two senior leaders are experienced RCAF helicopter pilots. Overall commander of Task Force Mali is Col. Chris McKenna, a highly experienced Chinook and Griffon pilot who previously commanded the (leased) Chinook detachment in Afghanistan (2010-2011), the new Chinook squadron (450 Squadron), as well as 427 Special Operations Aviation Squadron (Griffons, also at Petawawa). The immediate aviation detachment commander is Lt.-Col. Chris Morrison, commanding officer of 408 Squadron, who completed five operational deployments before Mali (three in Bosnia, two in Afghanistan). Given McKenna’s and Morrison’s Afghanistan experience, they understand the limitations of the underpowered but reliable Griffons in hot and dusty northeast Mali.

In addition to the core RCAF personnel who will fly and maintain the helicopters, the Canadian contribution to MINUSMA also includes a number of medical specialists, force protection teams and other support personnel based at Camp Castor. They will be replaced by a second rotation in January 2019, with the mission scheduled to wrap up in July 2019. In addition, it is not widely known that Canada also committed to filling up to 10 staff positions at MINUSMA headquarters in Bamako. To date, these roles include intelligence, operations, plans and information

¹³ For example, see David Pugliese, “Mali Mission Questions Still Go Unanswered by Canadian Forces, Liberals,” *Ottawa Citizen*, April 23, 2018. <https://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/defence-watch/mali-mission-questions-still-go-unanswered-by-canadian-forces-liberals>

¹⁴ Details of Op PRESENCE – Mali can be found at the CAF “Current Operations” website: <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/defence/caf/operations/military-operations/current-operations/op-presence.html> In a notable change to naming CAF operations, “Op PRESENCE – Location” will designate this and future CAF contributions to UN PSOs, rather than a new and separate operation name for each new commitment.

¹⁵ VOA Afrique, “Les casques bleus canadiens découvrent le Mali depuis les airs,” Aug. 7, 2018. <https://www.voaafrique.com/a/depuis-les-airs-les-casques-bleus-canadiens-d%C3%A9couvrent-le-mali-4516963.html>; Charlie Pinkerton, “Long Days, Dust and Heavy Rains: That’s Life for Canadians in Mali’s Camp Castor,” *iPolitics*, Aug. 24, 2018. <https://ipolitics.ca/2018/08/24/long-days-dust-and-heavy-rains-thats-life-for-canadians-in-malis-camp-castor>

¹⁶ Some of the Chinooks and Griffons were transported to West Africa in CC-177 Globemasters and reassembled and flight-tested at two unidentified staging points before being flown to Camp Castor.

¹⁷ See the photo accompanying former Defence minister Art Eggleton’s opinion piece, “Canadian Forces are Pulling Their Weight,” *Toronto Star*, July 11, 2018. <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2018/07/11/canadian-forces-are-pulling-their-weight.html>



operations, and usually these staff positions last for at least one year. Any ideas, however, that a Canadian general would eventually take up the previously offered role as force commander¹⁸ were ended with a UN announcement that a highly qualified Swedish general would replace the outgoing Belgian in October 2018.¹⁹ Last, in early July 2018 Canada committed to sending up to 20 police officers to Mali (likely a mix of French-speaking RCMP, Sûreté du Québec and municipal constables) to support la Police Nationale du Mali with investigative training.²⁰ This effort in Mali represents Canada’s largest peacekeeping or boots-on-the-ground footprint in Africa since 2001 (see below). At full strength, Canada’s aviation task force, medical technicians, force protection troops, staff positions at headquarters, plus 20 police officers – totalling perhaps 280 personnel – will still not put Canada into the top 10 of MINUSMA uniformed personnel providers. However, as currently planned, Canada will almost reach the UN peacekeeping target of 15 per cent women deployed in military operations and likely will surpass the 20 per cent target for police.²¹

Why Mali, Why Now, Why Helicopters?

It is beyond the scope of this report to explain the Mali crisis of 2011-2013 that led to robust French intervention and MINUSMA’s eventual establishment in 2013. An earlier report from the Canadian Global Affairs Institute provides that backstory.²² Other sources outline the complex evolution of violence and instability in Mali, the UN Security Council’s responses, and more detailed analyses of Mali’s ongoing crisis and international intervention.²³ There is no doubt that the African Union (AU), UN and NATO allies wanted Canadian participation in multilateral military operations in Mali since 2013. At the time, then-prime minister Stephen Harper pointedly refused, although one RCAF CC-177 Globemaster supported a rapid and robust French intervention in January 2013 that stopped insurgent Islamist forces moving south to the capital.²⁴ Including MINUSMA, there are currently 14 UN peacekeeping operations led by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) in New York. Of those 14 missions, half are in Africa. But that 50 per cent ratio hardly tells the full story. Of over 90,000 uniformed personnel deployed on these PSOs, 65,000 troops and 7,500 police are deployed to the seven African missions. Other than the legacy mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) with its 11,300 total personnel, every other mission outside Africa is relatively small, ranging from 114 to 1,180 troops, police and civilians. The

¹⁸ Mike Blanchard and Lee Berthiaume, “Canada Stalled on Request to Lead Mali Mission Because of Trump: Sources,” *The Globe and Mail*, Feb. 3, 2017. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/canada-stalled-on-un-request-to-lead-mali-mission-because-of-trump-sources/article33896668>

¹⁹ United Nations Secretary General, “Secretary-General Appoints Lieutenant General Dennis Gyllensporre of Sweden Force Commander of United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali,” (SG/A/1829-BIO/5125-PKO/750; Aug. 30, 2018) <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sga1829.doc.htm>

²⁰ Angelica Montgomery, “Quebec Provincial Police Could Join Mali Peacekeeping Mission,” CBC News, Aug. 5, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-provincial-police-could-join-mali-peacekeeping-mission-1.4766294> As of late August, there were no reports that any officers had yet been sent.

²¹ Murray Brewster, “Trudeau’s 1st Peacekeeping Mission Just Under UN Goal of 15% Female Soldiers,” CBC News, June 25, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/mali-women-peacekeeper-short-1.4721774> See also the “UN Peacekeeping Defence Ministerial: Vancouver Communiqué,” November 2017. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/un-peace-keeping/annex-b.html> Overall, the RCAF and the medical trades include more women than the combat arms, and the overall proportion of women in the regular force is 15 per cent, so meeting the gender target will not take special efforts.

²² Chris W. J. Roberts, “West African Canaries in the Gold Mine: Investment Outlook and Challenges for Burkina Faso and Mali,” Canadian Global Affairs Institute, April 2013. https://www.cgai.ca/west_african_canaries_in_the_gold_mine

²³ See BBC, “Mali Profile – Timeline,” updated July 20, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13881978>; Security Council Report, “Chronology of Events – Mali,” updated July 13, 2018. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/chronology/mali.php>; and the excellent series of reports on Mali published by *Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix* at UQAM. <https://dandurand.uqam.ca/centre-francopaix/#mali>

²⁴ Campbell Clark and Geoffrey York, “Harper Rules Out ‘Direct’ Canadian Military Mission in Mali,” *The Globe and Mail*, Jan. 8, 2013; updated May 11, 2018. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/harper-rules-out-direct-canadian-military-mission-in-mali/article7044771> Details of RCAF airlift support (under Op FREQUENCE) for the French intervention in 2013 (Op SERVAL) and ongoing counter-terrorism mission (Op BARKHANE) can be found at the CAF “Current Operations” website: <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad-current/op-frequence.page>



MINURSO mission in the western Sahara (at 470 personnel) is in that range, but the next smallest mission in Africa is UNIFSA (4,800, mostly Ethiopians), patrolling the disputed Abyei region between Sudan and South Sudan. The other five missions are where the bulk of DKPO human and financial resources go, and they range from 14,000 personnel with MINUSCA (Central African Republic or CAR) to over 20,000 with MONUSCO (Democratic Republic of Congo or DRC).²⁵ If Canada was ever going to “return to peacekeeping” in any kind of significant way, it was always going to be with one of these major missions in Africa.



Figure 2: A CH-146 Griffon helicopter departs for a training flight during Operation PRESENCE-Mali at Camp Castor in Gao, Mali on July 28, 2018. (Source: CAF Photo: Cpl. Ken Beliwicz)

Yet, it is not true that Canada has been completely absent from UN PSOs in Africa since Somalia, Rwanda or the “bungle in the jungle” in eastern DRC in late 1996.²⁶ The CAF has deployed individual military observers and staff officers to various missions over the last decade. Op CROCODILE covers the handful (usually nine) CAF personnel deployed to MONUSCO headquarters in the DRC.²⁷ During that time, Canada has been asked to lead MONUSCO and other missions on more than one occasion, in addition to multiple requests for extra personnel and

²⁵ All mission personnel figures were taken from UN Peacekeeping: “Where We Operate.” <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/where-we-operate> (figures as posted in August 2018).

²⁶ Canadian-led Op ASSURANCE had barely started to deploy when local events overtook the UNSC mandate. See Michael Hennessy, “Operation ‘Assurance’: Planning a Multi-National Force for Rwanda/Zaire,” *Canadian Military Journal*, vol. 2, no.1, spring 2001. <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vo2/no1/doc/11-20-eng.pdf>; Simon Massey, “Operation Assurance: The Greatest Intervention That Never Happened,” *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, Feb. 15, 1998. <https://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/123>

²⁷ See DND/CAF “Current Operations – Operation CROCODILE.” <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad-current/op-crocodile.page>



capabilities, all of which were refused.²⁸ Some CAF officers have completed one or more rotations to UNMISS or precursor missions in Sudan and South Sudan,²⁹ while others served in UN missions in CAR and Sierra Leone. If the Sinai Peninsula is counted as the bridge between Africa and the Middle East (and it is Egyptian territory), the Canadian contribution to the non-UN Multinational Force and Observers has long been its largest peacekeeping contingent on the continent, operating in an increasingly dangerous environment.³⁰ But, apart from Somalia (1992-1993), the largest contingent of Canadians ever deployed on a UN-authorized mission in sub-Saharan Africa passed by largely unnoticed, with UNMEE along the Ethiopian-Eritrean border (2000-2001). Canada’s Task Force East Africa comprised 450 soldiers in a reinforced mechanized company battle group, serving in a Dutch-led mechanized battalion.³¹ This rapid, integrated deployment was only possible due to existing Western middle-power co-ordination through the Multinational Stand-By High Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG), an initiative begun in the mid-1990s which achieved operational readiness and its first deployment to UNMEE in 2000.³² But SHIRBRIG wound down from the mid-2000s and officially closed in 2009, due in part to Canada’s and other contributors’ taxing efforts in Afghanistan as well as the creation of NATO, European Union and African rapid or standby brigade structures.³³ Though this mechanized unit included far more firepower and mobility than any Canadian ground force in Africa since the second South African War (1899-1902) or Somalia,³⁴ it served under a traditional peacekeeping mandate; that is, to monitor a peace agreement between two nation-states. Canada’s quick and quiet UNMEE success was achieved in one of the few post-Cold War PSOs in the Suez and Cyprus mould, unlike current complex PSOs.³⁵ Going as far back as the original Congo crisis (1960-1964), Canada has traditionally sent enablers and support services to those more complex UN PSOs in Africa, not combat arms. A helicopter task force and medical specialists are thus in line with that tradition.

Since early August 2016, Mali had been discussed as the most likely place for Canada’s return to peacekeeping (see Appendix 1).³⁶ This seemed to be confirmed when a government reconnaissance mission visited Mali in September 2016.³⁷ But no announcements followed.

²⁸ See Tonda MacCharles, “Why Canada Refused UN’s Request to Go to the Congo in 2010,” *The Toronto Star*, Oct. 28, 2016. <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/10/29/why-canada-refused-uns-request-to-go-to-the-congo-in-2010.html>; Murray Brewster, “Internal Documents Detail UN Peacekeeping Requests for Mali, Other Hotspots,” CBC News, June 19, 2017. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/un-peacekeeping-list-1.4166429>

²⁹ See DND/CAF “Current Operations – Operation SOPRANO” (which also includes links to previous operations in the region). <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad-current/op-soprano.page>

³⁰ Currently, just fewer than 70 CAF personnel are deployed in Sinai. See the Multilateral Force and Observers website: <http://mfo.org/en/contingents>; CAF/DND Current Operations, “Operation Calumet.” <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad-current/op-calumet.page>; and Evan Dyer, “Mosque Attack a Reminder of Threat to Canadian Sinai Force,” CBC News, Nov. 24, 2017. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/sinai-mosque-attack-canadian-peacekeepers-1.4418244>

³¹ DND/CAF “Past Operations – Operation ECLIPSE.” <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad-past/op-eclipse.page>

³² For an analysis of SHIRBRIG’s origins, evolution and deployments from a Canadian perspective, see Peter Armstrong-Whitworth, “SHIRBRIG: The Future of Canada’s Contribution to UN Peace Operation?” *Canadian Military Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2, summer 2007. <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vo8/no2/army-armee-eng.asp>

³³ Darl E. Cord II, “Development of SHIRBRIG and Similar Units for Utilization in UN Peacekeeping Missions and the Eventual Demise of SHIRBRIG,” (thesis) Peace Operations Training Institute (n.d., likely 2013). <https://d1quh137gh6ot5.cloudfront.net/theses/cord.pdf>

³⁴ No Canadian army unit participated in combat operations on the continent in either the First or Second World War, although individual Canadians did with allied units.

³⁵ The large Canadian mechanized contingent only stayed for one rotation (2000-2001) during the crucial period of establishing the mission and monitoring Ethiopian and Eritrean troop redeployments. A handful of CAF observers stayed on until 2003, and the mission closed down in 2008 due to lack of co-operation from Eritrea. See CAF/DND, “Operation ECLIPSE.” <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad-past/op-eclipse.page>

³⁶ Chris W. J. Roberts, “If a Mali Mission, Then Do It For the Right Reasons,” *The Hill Times*, Aug. 10, 2016. <https://www.hilltimes.com/2016/08/10/if-a-mali-mission-then-do-it-for-the-right-reasons/76435>

³⁷ Lee Berthiaume, “Ottawa Sends Fact-Finding Mission to Mali to Study Peacekeeping Operations,” *The Globe and Mail*, Aug. 31, 2016. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ottawa-sends-fact-finding-mission-to-mali-to-study-peacekeeping-operations/article31641823>; Campbell Clark, “A Canadian Peacekeeping Mission in Mali Could be Dangerous Choice,” *The Globe and Mail*, Sept. 14, 2016. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/a-canadian-peacekeeping-mission-in-mali-could-be-most-dangerous-choice/article31892156>



Opportunities that fall and the following year as host of the Vancouver peacekeeping summit in November 2017 were missed. A formal announcement finally came in March 2018 that Canada would become a MINUSMA TCC, but both domestically and internationally there were criticisms around how the announcement was handled.³⁸ But, for a few reasons, Mali always made the most sense. Contrary to both mainstream and alternative media commentary,³⁹ Canada and Mali have a long relationship: Mali retained development priority status from the late 1970s throughout the 2000s and into the 2010s under both Liberal and Conservative governments, even as other African countries were dropped from the priority list. Canada had trained elements of the Mali army and was the second largest bilateral aid donor in the March 2012 coup in Bamako (ahead of France but well behind the U.S.). Mali is easier to support directly from Canada and regional staging bases. And compared to the three other candidate missions in CAR, DRC and South Sudan, MINUSMA is – in relative terms – operating in an environment where there is some light at the end of the tunnel. Most Malians live in the south where the state and economy still function, and there is public support for the UN presence in the north. Most of the non-state armed groups in the north have signed on to the 2015 peace agreement, even if implementation has been slow and conflict dynamics continue to change.⁴⁰ Unlike the other three missions, there is also an element of insulating mostly Sufi Mali⁴¹ from Islamists linked to al-Qaida or the Islamic State.⁴² While long-standing grievances of northerners and more recently from communities in the central region are aimed at the government in Bamako, FAMa (Mali’s army), and affiliated local militias,⁴³ the regionally linked Islamist groups manipulate these dynamics and try to scuttle chances for peace. Civilians, militias and FAMa bear the brunt of these attacks, while the French Op Barkhane (headquartered in N’Djamena, Chad) and the five-nation G5 (Force conjointe du G5 Sahel) undertake counter-terrorism missions across the Sahel.⁴⁴ MINUSMA does not have a direct counter-terrorism mandate, but it has suffered most of its casualties through indirect (e.g., IEDs, mortars, rockets) or direct assaults (including suicide bombers and base attacks) from Islamist-linked groups. In 2017, the most dangerous regions for MINUSMA were Kidal (Sector North) and the central region of Mopti, with a total of 21 military and seven civilians killed by “malicious

³⁸ Government of Canada, “Canada Announces Second Peacekeeping Smart Pledge – Will Send Aviation Task Force to UN Mission in Mali,” March 19, 2018. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2018/03/canada-announces-second-peacekeeping-smart-pledge---will-send-aviation-task-force-to-un-mission-in-mali.html>; also see Canadian Press, “Canada’s Allies Frustrated with Trudeau Handling of Mali Peacekeeping Announcement,” Global News, March 24, 2018. <https://globalnews.ca/news/4103591/canada-mali-peacekeeping-mission-diplomats-frustrated>

³⁹ Since 1992, Mali has often been a top five bilateral development partner in Africa, Canadian mining firms have put Mali gold back into industrial production and Quebec-based NGOs have extended networks throughout the country. In the terror attack on a hotel in Bamako in November 2015, a number of Canadians had to be rescued. Typical mainstream media critiques of the idea of Canada doing peacekeeping in Mali (or Africa) are captured here: Rosie DiManno, “With Mali Mission, Canadian Troops are Entering a Madhouse,” *Toronto Star*, March 22, 2018. <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/star-columnists/2018/03/22/with-mali-mission-canadian-troops-are-entering-a-madhouse.html> and David Krayden, “Canada’s Peacekeeping Mission in Africa is Destined to Become the Folly in Mali,” CBC News, March 21, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/mali-mission-1.4585038>; a stereotypical alternative media view (though not much different) is Ezra Levant, “Canadians Have ‘No Interest’ in Mali,” *The Rebel.media*, March 20, 2018. https://www.therebel.media/canadians_have_no_interest_in_mali

⁴⁰ Karen McVeigh, “Mali Peace Deal Jeopardised by Armed Groups Linked to Terrorism, UN Warns,” *The Guardian*, Sept. 5, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/sep/05/mali-peace-deal-jeopardised-armed-groups-terrorism-un-security-council-warns>

⁴¹ Most Malians are Sunni Muslims, but their Sufism is anathema to austere Wahhabi beliefs and teachings. See Katarina Hojje, “Mali’s Sufi Leaders Preach Against Radicalization,” *VOA Africa*, May 25, 2016. <https://www.voanews.com/a/mali-sufi-leaders-preach-against-radicalization/3345868.html>

⁴² For example, the U.S. State Department recently (Sept. 5, 2018) declared Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM, only established in March 2017 by an amalgamation of smaller groups, and which claims to be al-Qaida’s official branch in Mali) a “Foreign Terrorist Organization” and a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist.” Press release. <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/09/285705> There are worries as ISIL and AQ fighters are squeezed out of Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, that some may end up back in the Sahel.

⁴³ Adam Sandor, “Insecurity, the Breakdown of Social Trust, and Armed Actor Governance in Central and Northern Mali,” *Stabilizing Mali Project Report*, *Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix*, August 2017. <https://dandurand.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2017/10/Sandor-english-Report.pdf>; Philip Kleinfeld, “‘I Have Lost Everything’: In Central Mali, Rising Extremism Stirs Intercommunal Conflict,” *IRIN*, Sept. 4, 2018. <http://www.irinnews.org/news-feature/2018/09/04/mali-fulani-dogon-extremism-stirs-intercommunal>

⁴⁴ Aissata Athie, “Coordinated Response Key to G5 Sahel Joint Force Success,” *IPI Global Observatory*, June 19, 2018. <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2018/06/coordinated-response-key-g5-sahel-success>



attacks”.⁴⁵ While Sector East, where Canadians operate, is hardly violence free, over the last 18 months Gao and its environs have seen less violence and fewer attacks compared to those other two regions or Tombouctou.⁴⁶ Since their contingents arrived in 2014, five Dutch and two German peacekeepers have died during their Mali rotations – including two each in attack helicopter crashes – although none was killed by enemy action.



Figure 3: A CH-147F Chinook helicopter takes off from Camp Castor in Gao, Mali during Operation PRESENCE on August 14, 2018. (Source: CAF Photo: Cpl. Ken Beliwicz)

Given Canada's risk tolerance and specific capabilities on offer, MINUSMA made the most sense for Canada's "return to peacekeeping." Mali offers a slightly less complicated political and operational environment compared to CAR, DRC and South Sudan. Mali is also easier to support logistically from Canada, and the Gao region offers the opportunity to work in close co-operation with two NATO allies (or three if you count the French).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Of 42 total MINUSMA deaths in 2017. UN: “At Least 71 United Nations, Associated Personnel Killed in Malicious Attacks against Peacekeeping Operations during 2017,” Jan. 26, 2018. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/org1663.doc.htm> Various African and the large Bangladeshi contingents bear the brunt of MINUSMA casualties. Chad alone accounts for nearly 1/3 of all deaths. See Signe Cold-Ravnkilde et al., “Friction and Inequality among Peacekeepers in Mali,” *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 162, no. 2, 2017: 34-42.

⁴⁶ Even during the two rounds of the presidential election (July-August 2018), there was more election-related violence in the central region than in the north. A good analysis about why is Alexander Thurston, “Mali’s Elections Saw Some Islamist Militant Violence. Here’s What Those Patterns Suggest,” *Monkey Cage/Washington Post*, Sept. 7, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/09/07/malis-elections-saw-some-jihadist-violence-heres-what-these-patterns-suggest>

⁴⁷ The current Canadian ambassador to Mali (since October 2017), Louis Verret, who previously served in Mali (2010-2013) and Afghanistan (2013-2017), provides complementary Canadian diplomatic and development experience in Bamako. http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/mali/offices-bureaux/ambassador_msg_ambassadeur.aspx?lang=eng It is unusual for senior-level diplomats to be posted abroad three consecutive times without a stint in Ottawa.



OPERATION PRESENCE – MALI: Canadian Foreign Policy and Political Aspects

If Mali seemed to be the most likely choice for Canada’s “return to peacekeeping”, the more fundamental political and policy questions remain unanswered. Should Canada increase its contribution to UN peacekeeping, and if so, when?⁴⁸ Should Canada put the CAF at risk in violent, intrastate conflicts in Africa?⁴⁹ Is the government just trying to score domestic political points and/or international ones (i.e., for an unlikely attempt to win a UN Security Council seat for 2021-2022⁵⁰) with a peacekeeping gambit? Does the CAF have the right equipment, training and bandwidth to operate in complex PSO environments, given all the other operational commitments in the Middle East and Eastern Europe? Those questions capture some of the key debates and criticisms about the Mali mission and peacekeeping in general. Three broad categories of critiques emerge: first, Mali isn’t a peacekeeping mission; second, Mali or Africa is not important to Canadian interests; and three, the entire mission is driven by the Liberal government’s political considerations (both domestic and international). Each category and related subsidiary questions require unpacking and analysis.

“Not Peacekeeping” Critiques

Typical criticisms include “this isn’t peacekeeping, this is a war zone”, or “this isn’t peacekeeping because there is no peace to keep”. Both assume peacekeeping should always look like Suez and Cyprus. The second also ignores that there is a peace agreement in Mali which the government and most non-state armed groups have signed, while the vast bulk of the population, who live in the south, are not directly affected by the instability in the centre and north. Peacekeeping, as stressed above, has only rarely followed the classic Suez model. A big part of this confusion stems from how long Canadians have been mostly absent from UN PSOs. The last large Canadian rotation pulled out of Cyprus in 1993 amid the crises in the former Yugoslavia, Somalia and Rwanda that all eventually showcased problems of ill-defined and ill-equipped multilateral missions in civil war situations. This period also exposed Canada’s limitations to support numerous deployments concurrently. The abortive effort in Zaire (DRC) in late 1996 led both Canadian politicians and military leaders to become even more skittish about complex missions, and to trust each other less.⁵¹ The short, successful UNMEE rotation barely registered on Canadian radar screens. Then 9/11 happened, drawing Canadian troops inexorably into Afghanistan and thus a decade-long unrelenting pressure on a small core of Canadian army combat and support units. Since that time, a whole range of large, complex, sometimes dangerous Chapter VII missions have stood up while some have successfully closed down.⁵² Canada’s support has been minimal in terms of personnel although significant in terms of money and sometimes

⁴⁸ A special issue of *International Journal* (vol. 73, no.2, 2018), co-edited by Sarah-Myriam Martin-Brûlé and Stéfanie von Hlatky, explores Canada’s potential role in UN operations in terms of objectives, capabilities and decision-making.

⁴⁹ An attempt to address this question in the context of Africa’s salience for Canadian security policy, bringing together practitioners and scholars in a 2016 workshop, found consensus around the need for a more comprehensive strategic approach towards the continent. See Chris W. J. Roberts and Tim Stapleton, “Revisiting Africa in Canadian Security Planning and Assessment,” *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, October 2016. <https://jmss.org/jmss/index.php/jmss/article/view/665/639> Other interesting results from a survey of participants are included in this article.

⁵⁰ As of summer 2018, I say “unlikely” because the competitors for the two 2021-2022 Security Council seats from the “Western European and Others Group” are Ireland and Norway. Ireland has maintained a more consistent peacekeeping profile than Canada (which traces back to the original Congo mission; see the 2016 Netflix film, “The Siege of Jadotville”) and both countries outspend Canada in development assistance on a per capita and GNI basis. But the campaign will continue until voting takes place in June 2020. See Michelle Zilio, “Trudeau to Pitch Canada’s Work on Development Funding in Bid for UN Security Council Seat,” *The Globe and Mail*, Sept. 7, 2018. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-trudeau-to-pitch-canadas-development-financing-efforts-as-part-of-bid>

⁵¹ Sean M. Maloney, “‘Lest we forget ...’ The Canadian Army and UN Peacekeeping (Again),” *Canadian Army Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2016, especially 126-128; and Duane Bratt, “Canada’s Peacekeeping Mission to Eastern Zaire, A Failed Attempt at Rehabilitating the Military,” *Peace Research*, vol. 30, no. 4, November 1988: 21-33. Rank and file CAF members’ mistrust of senior military/political leadership also widened through the 1990s.

⁵² Just in the last year, difficult yet ultimately successful missions in Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire have wound down.



equipment.⁵³ That minimal direct Canadian involvement kept the extent and evolution of UN missions hidden from most politicians and the public. Most large peacekeeping missions are stabilization, state-building and protection-of-civilians missions and have been for a long time. It seems only Canadians are stuck in some kind of mythical world where “peacekeeping” means lightly armed observers interposed between previously belligerent forces. The government is guilty of playing on that lingering sentiment, and that also explains why it took so long to find a relatively low-risk tasking in a high-risk environment.

There are three subsidiary criticisms in this category: “Canada shouldn’t deploy troops to dangerous UN operations because of weak rules of engagement”, “Canada shouldn’t send its troops to this dangerous mission without the proper equipment” or “Canada should only contribute troops to NATO or American-led missions, not typical UN ones”. The first does not reflect the realities of the MINUSMA mission, nor that Task Force Mali itself has relatively robust rules of engagement. The second criticism, however, has some bite. The Chinooks are ideal enablers in an expansive area of operations. The Griffons, however talented their crews, are never going to replace the Dutch Apache or German Tiger attack helicopters that conducted a range of missions from Gao, including as escorts for medevac and road convoys, recce and surveillance, deterrence and sometimes strike operations. That said, the Germans particularly had a hard time keeping their Tigers in the air due to the tough climatic conditions and high maintenance requirements.⁵⁴ The Griffons cannot fulfil the sharper-end roles, but they will likely fly more hours due to their lower maintenance requirements and other utility roles they can perform. The RCAF’s experience in Afghanistan will serve it well in Mali.

The third critique supersedes all the others in this category: UN peacekeeping should be left to others, and Canada should only work with U.S.- or NATO-led missions. That is a policy decision that can be debated, but in two ways it is a difficult argument to win. First, there are now over 100 regular TCCs and there will continue to be multilateral missions for the foreseeable future, with many of our allies and friends expecting Canada to share the burden. Second, pledging to work only with U.S. and NATO forces of course makes it easier for the CAF, given interoperability experience, but the assumption presupposes Canada should go along because the U.S. and/or European allies will always be doing the right mission for the right reason. And if allies are serving in non-NATO missions and Canada isn’t, that argument sounds less like a policy and more like an excuse not to contribute and to let others always shape the strategic environment. While there are still significant bureaucratic challenges and financial constraints in UN PSOs,⁵⁵ it is no longer a world of ad hoc management from New York and weak mandates or rules of engagement, as it was in the mid-1990s. Peacekeeping is what states make of it.

⁵³ For example, in the mid-2000s Canada loaned over 100 surplus Grizzly and Husky AVGPs to the African Union Mission in Sudan. See CAF/DND, “Operation AUGURAL.” <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad-past/op-augural.page> In 2018, Canada has the ninth largest assessed contribution to UN PSOs (nearly three per cent of the DPKO budget). <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/how-we-are-funded>

⁵⁴ DefenceWeb, “German Tigers End Flight Operations in Mali,” June 19, 2018. http://www.defenceweb.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=52099 Given available information, the Tiger fleet (four helicopters) flew approximately 80 hours/month (1,000 hours total) during the German deployment in Gao. After one crashed on July 26, 2017 the others were grounded until Oct. 4.

⁵⁵ Lee Berthiaume, “German Peacekeepers Warn about Cost-Conscious UN as More Canadians Arrive in Mali,” *Toronto Star*, June 25, 2018. <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2018/06/25/german-peacekeepers-warn-about-cost-conscious-un-as-more-canadians-arrive-in-mali.html>; Retired USMC Lt.-Gen. John Castellaw highlighted the positive cost-benefit calculations of UN peacekeeping for the U.S., even as the U.S. reduced its peacekeeping contributions: “The Case for UN Peacekeepers,” *US News & World Report*, Feb. 23, 2018. <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2018-02-23/un-peacekeepers-help-keep-us-soldiers-safe>



“Not Africa” Critiques

It is easy to see a connection between the adamantly “no UN peacekeeping” position and “Canada should never put its troops in harm’s way in Africa; African solutions to African problems” arguments. The biggest, most dangerous UN missions are in Africa today. Does Canada have any security interests in Africa? Some say no. But that is a serious debate that has yet to occur. Roy Rempel, writing about “Canada’s pretend foreign policy” as CAF deployed to Kandahar in 2006, argued that Canada’s typically “weak or absent strategic thinking is partly the result of the enduring perception that Canada is ‘a fireproof house, far from inflammable materials’.”⁵⁶ No one within National Defence Headquarters had ever contemplated that Canadian troops would spend over a decade in Afghanistan and later be training (and fighting alongside) Kurds in northern Iraq given yet another new regional threat. Promoting a narrow “Canada first” view of security policy that focuses on North America and NATO Europe ignores well over a century of Canadian security practice and deployments. The lessons to be learned from Somalia,⁵⁷ Rwanda and Zaire are not that Canada has no interests in Africa and should stay away at all costs. The lessons are that Canada has been and will be pulled into Africa for all sorts of direct and indirect reasons and should be better prepared. Proactive assessment and preparation should be rooted in hard-nosed analysis of the facts on the ground, of what is possible (means-ends, which may or may not be UN-centric) and what is not. From helping development partners fight terrorism but not suppress legitimate political opposition, or assisting UN PSOs in post-conflict situations, to conducting humanitarian and medical emergency missions, Canada can be more effective if it develops the capacity to think and act in a decisive manner to advance clear-cut objectives. That decisiveness can absolutely be about saying no, too. But any strategy which just assumes the African continent is irrelevant for Canadian security interests and thus for the CAF will, in fact, keep Canada out of important allied, partner and international decision-making. However, it won’t eliminate the demand-side call on the CAF nor ensure our “fireproof house” is insulated from the consequences of crises in Africa. When Ottawa attempts to sidestep responsibility in a continent where it has a long presence and which contains the fastest growing populations and economies, significant political and security challenges, and escalating geopolitical competition among the West, China and Russia (among others), it ultimately puts both the CAF and Canadian interests at higher long-term risk. Canadians might tell themselves that the African continent doesn’t matter to Canada, but that doesn’t square with the interconnectedness of today’s global security and economic realities.

“All Politics” Critiques

The most penetrating critiques about this mission, however, are not those focused on the nature of peacekeeping or the locale (Mali specifically, Africa in general). Some who can support a return to peacekeeping in Africa – and others who cannot – worry that the government is following a long-term pattern of putting politics ahead of the CAF’s welfare. They see a Trudeau government simply trying to score domestic political points based on a campaign promise that leveraged mythical peacekeeping nostalgia and international political points in a bid for a 2021-2022 UN Security Council seat. Dawson and Labbé suggest: “The Prime Minister is relying on the 20th-century understanding of peacekeeping because the harsher and starker reality would not feed into a liberal interpretation of Canada’s international role ... this commitment is about us, not the

⁵⁶ Roy Rempel, *How Canada’s Pretend Foreign Policy Has Undermined Sovereignty* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006): 16. That old quote about Canadian foreign policy comes from Senator Raoul Dandurand (1924).

⁵⁷ Grant Dawson and Serge Labbé, “Lessons from Somalia: Canada’s Mali Mission Must Be about Them, Not Us,” *The Globe and Mail*, June 26, 2018. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-lessons-from-somalia-canadas-mali-mission-must-be-about-them-not-us>



Africans we are meant to protect or UN peacekeeping.”⁵⁸ Canada made big announcements about a recommitment to peacekeeping, then dithered and thus misled both the UN and allies for two years. Then, it shrank that expected contribution to the lowest risk task in the least terrible mission for one year. This does not promote confidence that there is any long-term strategic vision or intention to make a difference in Mali, Africa or UN peacekeeping generally.⁵⁹ At the moment, Task Force Mali is scheduled to depart in July 2019, just weeks before the October 2019 federal election campaign kicks off. General Assembly voting for the 2021-2022 Security Council seat will occur in June 2020, so a political cynic might assume a potentially re-elected Liberal government would then make new peacekeeping commitments. Canadians can debate the merits of seeking a Security Council seat, but even those who might support the idea in principle question this government’s readiness and motivation, given its instrumentalist approach.⁶⁰ The government has left itself wide open to both domestic and international detractors.⁶¹

Conclusion: Is Mali a War Zone or a Peacekeeping Mission?

MINUSMA is what contemporary peacekeeping looks like. It co-ordinates 15,000 troops and police from over 50 countries operating across a sparsely populated region about the size of Alberta that faces sporadic, intense, but highly localized violence. Most of that violence is directed at civilians, FAMA and local militias, and occasionally the French and G5 counter-terrorism operations,⁶² not blue helmets. Why, then, has MINUSMA suffered so many fatalities? Most have occurred due to the lack of appropriate equipment used by the widely dispersed African contingents: 51 Chadians have been killed in the north, mostly when their convoys were hit by IEDs or ambushes. At least a third of MINUSMA fatalities were not due to malicious acts, but to training accidents and crashes. Canada’s Task Force Mali will provide highly proficient medevac and tactical airlift to support the ground units operating in Sector East. This is what contemporary peacekeeping looks like in a dynamic internal political conflict with regional spillover, including links to Sahelian al-Qaida and Islamic State affiliates.

Canada should neither always say no to peacekeeping missions in Africa nor commit to peacekeeping missions just to meet domestic political or international expectations. Either stance puts Canada at the whims of allied interests and strategies rather than well-defined Canadian ones. But history tells us that for all sorts of reasons Canada is persistently pushed and prodded to participate across the spectrum of military operations on the continent. Responses, then, should be based on Canadian assessments of event dynamics and possible solutions. Canada cannot assume allies (including France and the U.S.) always pursue the best course of action in Africa, through the UN or elsewhere. The new Mali mission illustrates more of the “just enough” mentality to CAF deployments in support of international peace and security. After political promises at home and increasing pressures and frustrations expressed by allies, the government finally accepts a technically demanding but comparatively low-risk task (where CAF will no doubt excel); limits that commitment in terms of personnel, materiel and time; and crosses its fingers

⁵⁸ Dawson and Labbé, “Lessons from Somalia.”

⁵⁹ Learning hard lessons from, and the limitations and consequences of, past UN operations is emphasized in Sean M. Maloney’s work. Again, see his “‘Lest we forget’”

⁶⁰ For example, see Eugene Lang and David Perry, “Remind Us, Why Does Canada Want a Seat on the UN Security Council?”, *The Globe and Mail*, May 7, 2018. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-remind-us-why-does-canada-want-a-seat-on-the-un-security-council>

⁶¹ Marta Canneri, “Is Canada Back? Trudeau’s Peacekeeping Promises Are Not Enough,” Council on Foreign Relations, May 29, 2018.

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/canada-back-trudeaus-peacekeeping-promises-are-not-enough>

⁶² For instance, in a span of three days, the G5 headquarters compound in Sévaré (June 29, 2018) and a French armoured column in Gao (July 1, 2018) were attacked.



that everyone comes home safely just before the next election. This approach may be politically predictable in Canada, but it is not inevitable. Three things need to happen to break past patterns. First, Canadians and CAF members need their government to admit the realities of contemporary UN peacekeeping as encompassing the entire range of military operations, not as an alternative to military operations. Second, senior policy-makers need to develop a convincing strategic rationale for why “forward security” deployments in Africa make sense for Canadian national interests. A realistic appraisal of possible implications of African security crises (from terrorism and mass migration to increasing great-power competition) for Canada does not have to rely on humanitarian impulses to draw the connections. And third, Canada’s chance to improve UN peacekeeping as a tool in support of Canadian national security and prosperity interests cannot occur without Canadians at the table. That does not mean jumping into every mission, but it does require deeper engagement with specific conflicts, illustrating that Canada is a serious stakeholder and not just a virtue signaller.



APPENDIX 1

Op PRESENCE – Mali Timeline

Mid-August 2016 – Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan completes “Fact-Finding Week” in Africa alongside retired Lt.-Gen. Romeo Dallaire and retired Justice Louise Arbour; they do not visit Mali.

Late August 2016 – First official announcement about financial (\$450 million) and troop commitments (up to 600) to UN PSOs, without specifics.

Early September 2016 – Government “reconnaissance mission” visits Mali/West Africa; separately, International Development Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau visits Mali, Senegal and Burkina Faso.

Fall 2016 – Rumours surface that Canada was asked to replace the outgoing Danish MINUSMA force commander, beginning early 2017.

November 2016 – Sajjan visits Mali and Senegal; then-Foreign Affairs minister Stephane Dion visits Nigeria, Kenya and Ethiopia (all significant TCCs to PSOs).

March 2017 – Belgian Maj.-Gen. Jean-Paul Deconinck appointed as MINUSMA force commander.

November 2017 – Canada starts to specify its own “smart pledges” at Vancouver peacekeeping summit: tactical transport support (Hercules to Uganda to support regional PSOs), an aviation task force (tactical helicopter detachment) and a quick reaction Force (QRF, up to 200 personnel).

March 2018 – Canada announces that the aviation task force will deploy to Mali/MINUSMA for one year.

May 2018 – Elements of 450 and 408 Squadrons, plus medical and force protection specialists, complete pre-deployment training at CFB Wainwright.

Late June 2018 – Theatre activation team arrives in West Africa, staging at various bases in region.

Mid-July 2018 – First helicopters arrive in Gao.

Early August 2018 – Initial medevac capabilities.

Mid-August 2018 – Aviation task force achieves full operational capacity, conducts first mission transporting Dutch reconnaissance patrol.

Late August 2018 – UN announces Swedish Lt.-Gen. Dennis Gyllensporre will succeed Deconinck as MINUSMA force commander in October 2018 (usually an 18- to 24-month appointment).

Early September 2018 – While Mali task force is operational, the planned Hercules deployment to Uganda has not occurred, with no further information provided about the QRF.

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