The Mali intervention

When future historians describe France’s military operations in the early 21st century, they may refer to “strategic bhadouc”, a persistent but entirely justifiable alternative. How can we know ourselves to armed bands, who spread obscurantist ideology and practices, terrorising the people of the north, as threatening those in the south? But equally how do we ignore the fact that humanitarian motives and the criminalisation of political opponents (African Tuareg linked to the opium trade, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to cocaine dealing and hostage-taking) are so often in conflict with western military operations that smack of neo-colonisation?

It is nearly two years since Osama bin Laden died, but Mali is still on the map. The Tuareg are doing better than ever. As former French prime minister Dominique de Villepin explained, “the open terror terrorists – Afghanistan, Libya, Mali – tend to grow and foment links with one another, join forces, combine in a number of actions” (1). So every western intervention seems to play into the hands of the most radical jihadist groups, who draw their opponents into endless, exhausting conflicts. Libyan weapons have been used in the war in Mali, and they may be recovered and used again on other fronts in Africa.

To justify his country’s military commitment, François Hollande announced that “France will always be there when it comes to the rights of a people, that of Mali, which wants to live in freedom and in democracy.” Such an enigmatic road map is bound to come up against the fact that the problem is not so much to “remanent” northern Mali but to secure lasting peace there, with due regard to the legitimate claims of the Tuaregs.

And that is just the start. We will then need to worry about the various secret military alliances and the quasi-disappearance of African borders. And to recognise that this was (and still is) encouraged by neoliberal solutions which have destroyed the viability of states, reduced their farmers and soldiers to beggary, and encouraged the overexploitation of Europe’s mineral resources by western (or Chinese) companies. We will have to admit that the traditional trade in drugs, arms and hostages depends entirely on non-African suppliers and consumers. And to concede that the drop in world prices for cotton has ruined the peasants in Mali, and that global warming has exacerbated the drought in the Sahel.

This (incomplete) list of subjects that are normally of no interest to anyone suggests that any liberation of Malian forces would force the root causes of the coming conflict. When it does come, the well be asked once again to “choose” – after being told, of course, that we no longer have any choice.

TRANSLATED BY BARBARA WILSON (Interview on France Info, 31 January 2013)

BY OLIVIER ZAJEC

Finding any logic in this situation between realism stemming from its ignorance and physical stagnation, which could lead to but a lack of foresight is a challenge. It also makes analysing the Mali episode more interesting. The French government, after months of procrastination, gave up its own contradictions, which allowed its opponents time to prepare, in turn trying to repair the local damage caused by its intervention in Libya. While helping to arrest the radical factions in the Sahel, has established the dominance of the Malian Tuaregs in the Sahel, resulting in the evacuation of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and of AQIM in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the Tuareg rebellion, speeding the defeat of the Mali government forces and political destabilisation in Bamako.

What to do has taken some time. As late as 11 October, François Hollande was insisting that there would be “no man on the ground, no engagement by French troops” and that France would only provide material support to Mali’s armed forces (2). This statement imprudently restricted France’s own freedom of action and ran the risk of being contradicted by the local situation, about which very little was known. On 10 January the key town of Konna, 790km northeast of Bamako, was captured by Islamist fighters of Ansar Dine and AQIM. There was then nothing between them and the capital. With the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) waiting to see what happened, the US, Russia (3), Turkey and the EU (4) were all calling for French intervention, and the option of French fighter planes and ground troops was left.

On 11 January France launched Operation Serval and, three months after declaring that France could not intervene on behalf of African countries, Hollande was forced to contradict himself. This casts doubt on the government’s anticipatory capabilities, and underlines the importance of understanding what “stabilisation” may involve in the future, at different levels.

Behind France’s procrastination lies the requisite of African Mali. This reflects the failure of the US neocolonial theory of “global counter-insurrection”, which has over-extended the timeframe for “stabilisation”, confused tactical action with policy, oversimplified the objectives of the war in Afghanistan and so deprived itself of a credible exit strategy. But the situation in Mali demonstrates that the failure of a strategic theory that has kept 100,000