



STABILITY SPECTRUM: THE BATTLE FOR STABILIZATION IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

Foreign military interventions to stabilize war-torn societies or failing states have been conducted throughout history. While the consequences of such operations for the host countries have been well-documented, little research has been conducted on the concept of stability as understood by the intervening state (or organization). France has launched four military interventions in the Central African Republic since it gained its independence in 1960 due to chronic instability. Despite these operations, the Central African Republic has not known a decade of stability and has suffered from multiple rebellions, military coups and violence. This apparent paradox raises the question of what stability means for France and what France has tried to implement in the country. This research paper analyses the dynamics of the French military interventions in the Central African Republic to understand how the concept of stability was constructed. It ultimately concludes that the concept of stability is a spectrum that fluctuates over time in accordance with the interests of the intervening state.

CONTENT

Introduction.....	2
The Politics of Intervention: What Does Stabilizing Mean?	2
<i>Defining Stabilization</i>	2
<i>The Changing Nature of French “Hot Stabilization” Missions in Africa</i>	2
From Barracuda to Boali: Stabilization to Secure French Interests?	3
<i>Operation Barracuda (1979)</i>	3
<i>Operations Almandin I, II and III (1996-1998)</i>	4
<i>Operation Boali (2003-2013)</i>	4
Sangaris (2013): A New Definition of Stabilization?	5
<i>The Legal Framework</i>	5
<i>No Interest at Stake?</i>	6
Conclusion	6
On the same topic	6
Sources	7



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INTRODUCTION

While foreign military interventions to stabilize countries have been conducted throughout history, these operations flourished during the Cold War and again after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. During the Cold War, States intervened in other countries to secure government allegiances and hence maintain their position *vis-à-vis* the other bloc¹. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, failed or failing states were identified as potential threats to international peace due to their potential use as safe havens by terrorist organizations². As a result, interventions to stabilize those countries increased. From Mali to Afghanistan, both unilateral and multilateral interventions were and continue to be launched to restore stability and ensure security. However, foreign stabilizing missions have brought mixed results.

The case of the Central African Republic is particularly puzzling. Since its independence in 1960, the country has suffered from multiple rebellions, military coups and violence. To implement or restore political order and stability, its former colonial power, France, triggered several military field operations over the last 40 years. While these different military operations can be qualified as 'successful' since they met their respective goals with low casualties, the Central African Republic has not known a decade of stability. This apparent paradox raises the question of what stability means, particularly in the Central African Republic, and how its understanding evolves.

This research paper seeks to explain the dynamics of the French stabilizing missions in the Central African Republic (CAR). It argues that each mission embodied a certain understanding of stability that reflected French interests.

THE POLITICS OF INTERVENTION: WHAT DOES STABILIZING MEAN?

Defining Stabilization

In the field of international relations, stability of the international order can be defined as "the probability that the system retains all of its essential characteristics; that no single nation becomes dominant; that most of its members continue to survive; and that large-scale war does not occur"³. At the state level, stability therefore refers to "the probability of their continued political independence and territorial integrity without any significant probability of becoming engaged in a war for survival"⁴. Consequently, the stabilization of failed or failing states by foreign actors can be defined as "a combination of military, humanitarian, political and economic instruments to render stability"⁵.

The military component of stabilization or "hot stabilization" therefore aims at "strengthening host states by providing security against internal or external threat"⁶. Providing security can take different forms from direct military intervention to the training of local forces.

The Changing Nature of French "Hot Stabilization" Missions in Africa

The legal framework of French military operations in Africa shifted from unilateral missions under defence treaties to unilateral or multilateral ones under the auspices of the UN.

Firstly, in the context of decolonization and the Cold War, France signed defence treaties with its former African colonies⁷. These treaties defined a framework for military assistance with African states and allowed France to have multiple permanent military bases on the continent. Moreover, most of these treaties contained a secret clause authorizing African partners to directly call for a French operation in the event of external or internal threat. From 1960 to 1977, France maintained a close watch over its former colonies, often adopting an arbitrary understanding of these secret

1. Marie Olson Lounsbury *et al.*, "Unilateral and Multilateral Intervention: Effects on Stability and Security", *Democracy and Security*, 7:3, 2011, p. 227.

2. Morten Boas and Kathleen M. Jennings, "'Failed States' and 'State Failure': Threats or Opportunities?", *Globalization*, 4:4, 2007, p. 476.

3. Karl Deutsch and David Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability", *World Politics*, 16:3, 1964, p. 390.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 391.

5. Sarah Collinson *et al.*, "States of Fragility: Stabilization and its Implications for Humanitarian Action", *Disasters*, 34, 2010, p. 276.

6. Nathaniel Powell, "Why Military Interventions Fail", *OpenDemocracy.net*, 2015.

7. Valentin Germain and capitaine Nicolas Rey, "50 ans d'Opex en Afrique (1964-2014)", *Cahier du Retex*, Centre de doctrine et d'enseignement du commandement, mai 2015, p. 19.

clauses, keeping allied regimes in place through stabilizing missions⁸. Beginning in 1977⁹, France then spread its military influence beyond its former colonies, such as in the former Republic of Zaire and Rwanda, thereby expanding its stabilizing missions¹⁰. Throughout this period, France was able to intervene unilaterally in its preserve, with the tacit agreement of Western powers which focused on other countries, legitimizing its actions with defence treaties.

Since Operation Turquoise in Rwanda in 1994, France redefined its operations' framework. In an effort to gain international legitimacy for its military operations and so as not to appear as a neo-colonialist power, France renegotiated its defence treaties with African states. However, it is important to note that this shift also reflected the desire of African leaders to reshape their relationship with France and gain greater autonomy. These new defence treaties focused on military cooperation and suppressed all secret clauses regarding intervention in the event of instability. As such, the 2010 defence agreement with the Central African Republic defined military cooperation as a partnership to help the country develop its own system of defence and explicitly mentioned the suppression of all previous arrangements¹¹.

Simultaneously, France reconsidered the conditions of its interventions¹². France focused on building peacekeeping capacities in African countries through training programs such as RECAMP¹³ (Reinforcement of African Capacity to Maintain Peace). In the meantime, France incorporated its military operations within the UN legal framework, operating under UN resolutions, and reinforced its partnerships with international organizations such as the European Union and the African Union regarding both the training of African forces and interventions in time of crises¹⁴.

Thus, the legal framework under which French stabilizing missions were launched evolved to gain legitimacy from the international community. France restricted its bilateral engagements to favour interventions approved by the UN and reduced its permanent presence on the continent¹⁵.

FROM BARRACUDA TO BOALI: STABILIZATION TO SECURE FRENCH INTERESTS?

Operation Barracuda (1979)

On January 1st 1966, Jean-Bedel Bokassa seized power from President David Dacko in a *coup d'État*. In the context of the Cold War and due to threats posed by China and the USSR in the East of the Central African Republic¹⁶, he was endorsed by France that eventually sent troops in 1967 when he feared a *coup*¹⁷. To keep him as a close ally, France also supported and helped organize his emperor coronation ceremony in 1977.

Yet, soon after the ceremony, Bokassa fell into disgrace. First, tensions between France and its traditional African allies such as Omar Bongo arose as they disapproved the coronation ceremony¹⁸. In addition, tensions increased within the Central African Empire: the social environment worsened, the opposition grew and students were massacred in the spring of 1979¹⁹. Ultimately, Bokassa's ambiguous relations with Libya sealed his fate. Since 1978, France was at war with Libya in Chad²⁰ after Libya annexed the Aouzou band (Chad), took Faya-Largeau (Chad) and supported certain branches of the Chadian rebellion²¹. In this context, Bokassa's growing ties with Gaddafi constituted a direct threat to French interests in the region.

8. Raphaël Granvaud, "De l'armée coloniale à l'armée néo-coloniale: (1960-1990)", *Revue d'études et de critique sociale*, 1:31, 2014, p. 193-200.

9. Operation Verveine in the Former Republic of Zaire. See: Valentin Germain and capitaine Nicolas Rey, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

10. Valentin Germain and capitaine Nicolas Rey, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

11. Ministère des Affaires étrangères (MAE), "Décret n° 2011-1109 du 16 septembre 2011 portant publication de l'Accord entre le Gouvernement de la République française et le Gouvernement de la République centrafricaine instituant un partenariat de défense", *Journal officiel* n° 0217, 18 septembre 2011, p. 15 622.

12. Raphaël Granvaud, "Interventions militaires françaises en Afrique. Nouvelle donne géopolitique", *Revue d'études et de critique sociale*, 1:31, 2014, p. 249.

13. Established in 1997, RECAMP was a French program to train African forces in partnership with sub-regional organizations. In 2007, RECAMP became EURORE-CAMP, a European Union program to strengthen the African Peace and Security Architecture. See: Centre interarmées de concepts, de doctrines et d'expérimentation (CICDE) "Renforcement des capacités africaines de maintien de la Paix", 22 septembre 2011.

14. Sénat, Commission des Affaires étrangères, de la Défense et des forces armées, *Rapport sur le projet de loi autorisant l'approbation de l'accord entre le Gouvernement de la République française et le Gouvernement de la République centrafricaine instituant un partenariat de défense et sur le projet de loi autorisant la ratification du traité instituant un partenariat de défense entre la République française et la République gabonaise*, Rapport 245, 19 janvier 2011, p. 7.

15. The number of prepositioned soldiers in French military bases decreased.

16. Jean-Pierre Bat, "Les diamants (de Bokassa) sont éternels. 'Pré carré' et guerre fraîche: la fabrique de la Françafrique", *Afrique contemporaine*, 2:246, 2013, p. 130.

17. Raphaël Granvaud, *op. cit.*, "De l'armée coloniale à l'armée néo-coloniale: (1960-1990)", p. 212.

18. Jean-Pierre Bat, *op. cit.*, p.130.

19. Valentin Germain and capitaine Nicolas Rey, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

20. France launched Operation Tacaud on February 17th 1978 in Chad to support the incumbent government and fight the Libyan presence in the country. See: Jean-Pierre Bat, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

21. Jean-Pierre Bat, *op.cit.*, p. 136.

Operation Barracuda was launched in September 1979 and highlights how the secret clause of the defence treaty can be manipulated. First, the French External Intelligence Services organized the covert Operation Caban on September 20th to return former president David Dacko to power in Bangui²². Once back in the presidential seat, Dacko re-established the Republic and invoked the defence treaty to trigger an official French operation. Operation Caban hence became Operation Barracuda on September 21st. France took advantage of the secret clause to legitimize its intervention after it launched a covert one.

Since Bokassa was hindering French interests and threatening its control of the region, stability and stabilization of the CAR meant overthrowing him.

Operations Almandin I, II and III (1996-1998)

The first democratic elections in the CAR took place in 1993 and brought Ange-Félix Patassé to power. While democratization was welcomed as an opportunity to resolve political, economic and social problems in the country, Patassé fuelled ethnic divisions by favouring the Kaba tribe, just like his predecessor, the General Kolingba, did with his (the Yakoma)²³. Patassé privileged the presidential guard, composed of members of his ethnic group and Chadian forces, at the expense of the regular army forces. This situation paved the way for mutinies among the Central African forces in the spring 1996, leading to three successive French operations.

Operation Almandin I was launched on April 18th 1996 and lasted until May 17th 1996. Operation Almandin II started on May 18th 1996 and ended on June 19th 1997. Finally, Operation Almandin III was triggered on June 20th 1997 and troops withdrew on April 15th 1998²⁴.

The objectives of these operations were to restore political order by preventing a military coup against an elected president. Stability was hence understood as the actions necessary to uphold Patassé's regime. France justified its operations by the defence of democracy.

Operation Boali (2003-2013)

Despite the rebellions, Patassé was re-elected in 1997. In 2001, François Bozizé, former ally of Patassé, launched a coup to overthrow the regime. This attempt failed. He found refuge in Chad where he was supported by France due to Patassé's rapprochement with Libya²⁵. President Chirac then signed an agreement with Bozizé in October 2002 to launch a French intervention if his coup succeeded²⁶. Backed by Chadians forces, Bozizé took advantage of Patassé's absence during a trip to a regional summit to successfully launch an attack that resulted in the fall of Bangui on March 15th 2003²⁷. Operation Boali started in March 2003 and lasted until December 2013²⁸.

The mission's goal was to support the Central African army by training and advising them as well as the regional forces present in the CAR²⁹. In 2005, several armed groups triggered a rebellion in the North and attempted to march South on Bangui. Boali forces intervened twice in extremis in 2006 and 2007 to help the Central African army counter the rebels' attacks and save Bozizé's regime³⁰.

While the training mission continued, the renegotiation of the defence treaty between France and the Central African Republic in 2010 prevented French forces from directly intervening if threats were posed to the government. Consequently, when the Séléka³¹ launched its rebellion in 2012, Boali elements focused on the protection of French and Euro-

22. Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, *Chronique de la crise centrafricaine 1996-1997: le syndrome Barracuda*, L'Harmattan, 1997, p. 6.

23. Jennifer Giroux *et al.*, "The Tormented Triangle: the Regionalization of Conflict in Sudan, Chad and the Central African Republic", *Working Papers*, Crisis States Research Centre, 47:2, 2009, p. 5.

24. Valentin Germain and capitaine Nicolas Rey, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

25. Jennifer Giroux *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

26. Valentin Germain and capitaine Nicolas Rey, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

27. Andreas Mehler, "Rebels and Parties: the Impact of Armed Insurgency on Representation in the Central African Republic", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 49:1, 2011, p. 125.

28. Valentin Germain and capitaine Nicolas Rey, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

29. Valentin Germain and capitaine Nicolas Rey, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

30. Florent de Saint-Victor, "45 ans d'opérations militaires françaises en République Centrafricaine", *Lettre du Retex*, Centre de doctrine et d'enseignement du commandement, 9 décembre 2013, p. 4-5.

31. In 2012, several rebel groups from the northeast assembled to form the Séléka, meaning alliance in Sango. The Séléka denounced the marginalization of the region and the regime's non-compliance with the peace accords signed in 2007 and 2008. See: Andrea Ceriana Mayneri, "La Centrafrique, de la rébellion Séléka aux

pean citizens as well as strategic places such as the embassy³². In addition, the non-intervention can also be explained by, to some extent, the Chadian³³ support of the Séléka. When the Séléka took Bangui on May 24th 2013, Boali forces were present and did not intervene.

The Boali mission can hence be divided into two periods. Prior to the renegotiation of the defence treaty, Boali forces contributed to political stability by twice rescuing Bozizé's government, training the army and providing logistical support to the regional peacekeeping missions. Stability was therefore understood as maintaining Bozizé in power. After the renegotiation of the defence treaty, the French forces did not intervene beyond the protection of European citizens.

In sum, the study of French military interventions in the Central African Republic reveals how the concept of stability evolved. Each operation exhibited a specific understanding of how to restore or implement order in the country. While each stabilizing mission was a response to neutralize a threat, each threat was understood according to French interests and therefore evolved over time.

SANGARIS (2013): A NEW DEFINITION OF STABILIZATION?

The Legal Framework

When Bozizé called France for help in December 2012, President Hollande initially refused to assist his regime, underlining the fact that France would not launch a unilateral mission without the approval of the international community³⁴. On December 5th 2013, the UN Security Council authorized the deployment of a French operation, Sangaris, as well as an African-led mission, MISCA³⁵. On the same day, anti-balaka³⁶ militias launched an offensive on Bangui, forcing France to trigger its operation two weeks before the planned date³⁷.

In his speech announcing Operation Sangaris on December 5th 2013, President Hollande emphasized the humanitarian nature of the mission, arguing that "France has no other objective than to save lives"³⁸. President Hollande indeed insisted that the well-being of the population was the cornerstone of the mission affirming that France "came to defend [...] the dignity of human life"³⁹. Moreover, President Hollande argued that France had no hidden agenda stating that "France, here in the Central African Republic, has no interest for itself, there are no personal benefits derived from our presence"⁴⁰. Twenty years after the Rwandan genocide, France could not let history repeat itself in one of its former colony⁴¹. The humanitarian nature of the mission broke with the previous dynamics of operations launched in the Central African Republic. For the first time, the objectives of the mission were centred on the population itself and not on a regime.

The UN tasked the Sangaris forces to "support MISCA in the discharge of its mandate"⁴². Consequently, the purpose of the stabilizing mission was to maintain a minimum level of security. As such, President Hollande explained that the goals were "to disarm militias, to confine them and to prevent clashes"⁴³. This meant that, for the first time in the country, France would act as an impartial actor, protecting civilians from both ex-Séléka⁴⁴ and anti-balaka militias to eventually pave the way for the organization of free and fair elections as well as peacebuilding initiatives.

groupes anti-balaka (2012-2014) : Usages de la violence, schème persécutif et traitement médiatique du conflit", *Politique Africaine*, 2:134, 2014, p. 181.

32. Florent de Saint-Victor, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

33. Chad has long been a French ally in the region. France has launched multiple stabilizing interventions since 1969 and Chad has become increasingly important in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel. See: "Opérations en Afrique centrale : Épervier et Boali", *Cahier du Retex*, Centre de doctrine et d'enseignement du commandement, 2009, p. 29.

34. Patrice Gourdin, "République centrafricaine : géopolitique d'un pays oublié", *Diploweb.com*, 1^{er} octobre 2013.

35. MISCA: African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic.

36. Meaning machete-proof or anti AK bullet in Sango, anti-balaka militias are loosely-affiliated defense-groups that emerged in the spring 2013 to fight the Séléka. See: Didier Niewiadowski, "La République centrafricaine: le naufrage d'un État, l'agonie d'une nation", *Afrilex*, université Bordeaux-IV, 21 janvier 2014, p. 1-68.

37. Roland Marchal, "Premières leçons d'une drôle de transition en République Centrafricaine", *Politique africaine*, 3:139, 2015, p. 127.

38. *LeMonde.fr*, "Centrafrique: Hollande annonce le début d'une intervention française", 5 décembre 2013.

39. François Hollande, "Déclaration de M. François Hollande, président de la République, sur l'intervention militaire française en Centrafrique", Bangui, 10 décembre 2013.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer and Olivier Schmitt, "Frogs of War: Explaining the New French Military Interventionism", *War on the Rocks*, 14 octobre 2015.

42. United Nations Security Council, "Imposes an Arms Embargo in Connection with the Central African Republic", Resolution 2127, S/RES/2127, 5 December 2013, p. 9.

43. François Hollande, *op. cit.*

44. The Séléka was dissembled in September 2016, leading to the emergence of ex-Séléka militias.

Operation Sangaris reflected the new legal framework that France adopted to launch its stabilizing missions. It is embedded in an international mandate, has a humanitarian purpose and is supposed to remain neutral when dealing with the actors of the crisis.

No Interest at Stake?

Although Operation Sangaris was first and foremost triggered to prevent genocide, political and economic interests were also at stake.

Operation Sangaris illustrates how both values (preventing genocide) and interests can coexist in explaining why an intervention is launched. As De Gaulle said, “countries do not have friends, only interests”⁴⁵. In this case, stability being understood as preventing the collapse of the Central African state also conveys a geopolitical interest for France. Located in the heart of Africa, the Central African Republic holds an important geostrategic position. France has multiple economic interests in neighbouring countries and hence cannot afford for the Central African Republic to become another Somalia, which could destabilize the region. Moreover, the CAR is rich in strategically important natural resources. France is therefore also intervening in the country to safeguard its position and interests in the region.

In sum, Operation Sangaris represented a shift in the way France conducts stabilizing missions in the Central African Republic. On this occasion, stability was not a question of securing an allied regime but rather about halting violence.

CONCLUSION

Whereas in 1979, stability was understood as the overthrow of a cumbersome emperor, in 1996 it meant maintaining an allied regime at the expense of mutineers. In 2002 stability was understood as supporting the actor behind a coup while in 2012 it meant non-intervention during a rebellion. Finally, with Operation Sangaris, stability meant preventing the total collapse of the state while remaining a neutral actor. In the case of the Central African Republic, it can therefore be concluded that the concept of stability is a spectrum that fluctuates over time and reflects the intervening state's interests in a particular geopolitical context.

Today, the Central African Republic remains plagued by instability. 14 armed groups control over 60% of the territory and a surge in violence since September 2016 led 100,000 people to flee their homes⁴⁶. In the long run, the potential emergence of Islamist groups due to unresolved grievances could yet change once again the dynamics of stabilisation in the country.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author's alone and do not reflect those of Iguaçu.

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