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OPERATION SERVAL: A MANEUVERIST SUCCESS?

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OPERATION SERVAL: A MANEUVERIST SUCCESS?

18 months after its rapid initiation on 11 January 2013, Operation Serval (Op Serval) officially came to a close on 13 July 2014. The military campaign has been seen by most as a resounding ‘maneuverist’ success.¹ However, some critical voices have recently suggested that Serval’s initial success was more a due mere luck than anything else and that although the operation was successful in repelling the jihadists, it did not solve the problem per se.²

Was Op Serval a successful application of maneuver warfare? As with most questions of this type, the answer depends on one’s interpretation of the facts and concepts at play and in the case of Op Serval, it depends on how one defines maneuver warfare and how one defines success.

This paper will argue that while the French army’s did deliberately and successfully apply some aspects of maneuver warfare during Op Serval, the lack of agreement on what the concept of maneuver warfare really is and the fact that it is invariably tainted by the culture of and ideology of the military institutions that apply it make the concept somewhat nebulous. Furthermore, while the French’s boldness has paid off in this particular case (at least militarily), we should be careful in the lessons that we draw from Op Serval given that the operation could have been jeopardized by a more robust and determined enemy and that the governance situation in Mali (or the Sahel region as a matter of fact) remains problematic.

¹ “Operation Serval: le retour à la maneuver aéroterrestre dans la profondeur.” *Réflexions Tactiques*, numéro spécial 2014, 5. See also, Jean-Bernard Pinatel, “L’intervention au Mali révèle l’efficacité de l’école française de la guerre non-conventionnelle,” *Atlantico.fr*, March 18, 2013; Michael Shurkin, *France’s War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army* (Stanta Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014), 10; and *Rapport d’information de l’Assemblée Nationale sur l’opération Serval au Mali* (Paris: Assemblée Nationale, July 18, 2013), 32.

² Sarah Halifa-Legrad, “Mali. Serval, une operation pas si réussie,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 11 January, 2014.

What is maneuver warfare?

Although the concept of ‘maneuver’ is central to many Western military doctrines, it has attracted and continues to attract much controversy partly due to the various meanings that the word ‘maneuver’ can have. In its most simple form, to ‘maneuver’ simply means to move in a physical sense and is related to mobility. Such a use, Lind says, “is encountered in such phrases as ‘tactics of fire and maneuver,’ where the movement of the rushing element is described as ‘maneuver.’”³

A second interpretation of maneuver, as proposed by Lind, is “movement relative to an enemy’s position [...] to secure or retain positional advantage.”⁴ While this later interpretation of the term is generally the definition adopted by most Western militaries, historically, it has also been the most common use of the term ‘maneuver,’ and has also been an important element of warfare since the dawn of recorded history.⁵ It should be noted however that according to this interpretation, maneuvering does not necessarily have to occur on the physical plane. In fact, as Kiszely suggests, it may involve one opponent seeking to “mentally out-manoeuvre the other, as in a game of chess.”⁶ In that sense, he argues, “this is an approach often favoured by the weaker, who wishes to avoid a sloggy match.”⁷

NATO in general, and the U.S. in particular were in such a position of relative ‘weakness’ against the Warsaw pact in the early 1980s when they developed the concept of maneuver warfare. At this time, the U.S. and particularly the U.S. Army, were still very much coping with

³ William S. Lind, “The Theory and Practice of Maneuver Warfare.” In *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology*, edited by Richard D. Hooker, Jr., 3-18 (Novato: Presidio Press, 1993), 3. See also Michel Yakovleff, “Le Concept de manoeuvre.” Chapter 1 in *Guerre et Manoeuvre: Héritage et renouveau*, edited by Christian Malis, 7-22 (Paris: Economica, 2009), 7.

⁴ *Idem.* See also John Kiszely, “The meaning of manoeuvre,” *The RUSI Journal* 143, no.6 (Spring 2008): 36-40.

⁵ Lind, “The Theory and Practice of Maneuver Warfare,” 3.

⁶ Kiszely, “The meaning of manoeuvre,” 36.

⁷ *Idem.*

the defeat in Vietnam and the lethality of the modern battlefield had just been rediscovered thanks to the Yom Kippur war of 1973. Therefore, in a situation of nuclear parity since the end of the 1960s and a conventional numerical advantage in favor of the Warsaw pact, the U.S. and NATO appear to have no choice but to ‘dig in’. Indeed, while the 1976 doctrine of “Active Defense” proposed to mitigate the Soviet’s firepower with a defense made of forces concentrations in vital areas, counter-attacks and ‘flanking’ maneuvers along the front, it lacked the depth to orchestrate a proper mobile defense and would not see its reinforcement arrive from the continental U.S. before eight weeks following a Warsaw pact offensive (i.e. after the engagement of the second soviet echelon).⁸

As such, as Kiszely explains, the “Active Defense” doctrine attracted a lot of criticism based on the fact that it “overemphasized firepower at the expense of manoeuvre, and relied on attrition when this played to the strength of the enemy.”⁹ Amongst the critics, William Lind deplored “this ‘Maginot mentality’, proposing instead what he referred to as ‘maneuver doctrine.’”¹⁰ In that sense, the proponents of maneuver warfare tend to define their doctrine in relation to and by its departure from attritional and positional warfare where firepower plays a central role. Indeed, as Lind states:

The object [of attrition] is simply to pour firepower on the enemy, [...] the massive application of firepower and technology as a substitute for skill, proficiency, leadership, and training. [On the other hand], the object in maneuver warfare is not to kill enemy soldiers, but to shatter the ability of whole enemy units ... to fight in an organized, effective way, and to panic and paralyze enemy commanders. The main means is not firepower, but maneuver.¹¹

⁸ Étienne Durand, “Maneuver Warfare, entre Vietnam et Transformation.” Chapter 5 in *Guerre et Manoeuvre: Héritage et renouveau*, edited by Christian Malis, 67-87 (Paris: Economica, 2009), 78.

⁹ Kiszely, “The meaning of manoeuvre,” 37. See also Durand, “Maneuver Warfare, entre Vietnam et Transformation,” 70.

¹⁰ *Idem.*

¹¹ Sen. Gary Hart and William S. Lind, *America Can Win*, (Bethesda, MD: Adler and Adler Publishing, 1986): 30-31.

The crux of the current debate on maneuver warfare resides therefore on this divide between attrition and maneuver and whether such a split does and/or should exist. For example, critics such as Daniel Bolger argue that maneuver warfare “is bunk” and that the maneuver/attrition split is “a bogus one, invented with an eye toward avoiding Vietnam-era body counts.”¹² He goes on to state that:

No competent soldier, let alone the entire U.S. military establishment, should embrace it. Subjected to serious scrutiny, maneuver warfare’s theoretical assumptions turn out to be laughably flimsy... so are the battlefield prescriptions that flow from such flawed premises.¹³

William Owen seems to agree with Bolger’s conclusion, arguing further that “the wide acceptance of [maneuver warfare] indicates a lack of understanding of the works and examples cited to promote it and ignorance of the purpose and limits of the military instrument.”¹⁴ In fact, while he does not dispute the fact that the purpose of maneuver is to gain a position of advantage relative to an opponent, he argues that this position of advantage may and should then be used “to deliver overwhelming violent attrition.”¹⁵ As such, Owen does not see maneuver and attrition as exclusive of one another but rather as complimentary, particularly when one considers all the elements of national power.¹⁶

Yet, the ‘maneuverist’ approach goes beyond the mere debate between attrition and maneuver and in fact introduces concepts with significant change potential for the military institution and culture. One of those concepts is the notion of ‘tempo’; this idea that not only does one have to move to gain a position of advantage in relation to the enemy but also move “faster than the enemy, to defeat him through superior tempo” (i.e. the idea that war is a

¹² Daniel P. Bolger, “Maneuver Warfare Reconsidered.” In *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology*, edited by Richard D. Hooker, Jr., 19-41 (Novato: Presidio Press, 1993), 26.

¹³ Bolger, “Maneuver Warfare Reconsidered,” 21.

¹⁴ William F. Owen, “The Manoeuvre Warfare Fraud.” *Small Wars Journal*, September 5, 2008, 8.

¹⁵ *Idem*.

¹⁶ See also Kiszely, “The meaning of manoeuvre,” 38.

competition in time even more than in position).¹⁷ Therefore, according to Lind, “the principal weapon in maneuver warfare is speed; not just speed in movement, though that is important, but speed in everything.”¹⁸

The most influential author on time competitiveness in warfare is Colonel John Boyd, USAF, with his conceptualization of the cycles of observing, orienting, deciding, and acting (OODA Loop). According to Boyd’s theory, whoever can go through this ‘loop’ fastest gains a tremendous advantage, primarily because “by the time his opponent acts, his own action has already changed the situation so as to make the opponent’s action irrelevant.”¹⁹

Yet, this conception implies correlated cultural changes because it involves amongst other things, a radical decentralization of authority. Indeed, speed in action requires that decision be made at the lowest possible level. As Lind highlights, “it demands subordinates who think, make independent decisions, assume responsibility, and show initiative.”²⁰ However, this delegation of authority comes with a corresponding increase in risk and as such requires an acceptance of what Lind calls ‘honest mistakes,’ which leads him to conclude that “maneuver warfare and ‘zero defects’ are incompatible.”²¹

From the above discussion, it is undeniable that the development of the maneuver warfare doctrine was heavily influenced by the context that prevailed at the time of its development as well as by the ideology and institutional identity of its architects. This highlights the fact that the concept of maneuver warfare has limits from a theoretical perspective as highlighted by Bolger and Owen. None withstanding, from an institutional and operational perspective, some key maneuver warfare concepts continue to have merit in this day and age despite the argument that

¹⁷ Lind, “The Theory and Practice of Maneuver Warfare,” 4.

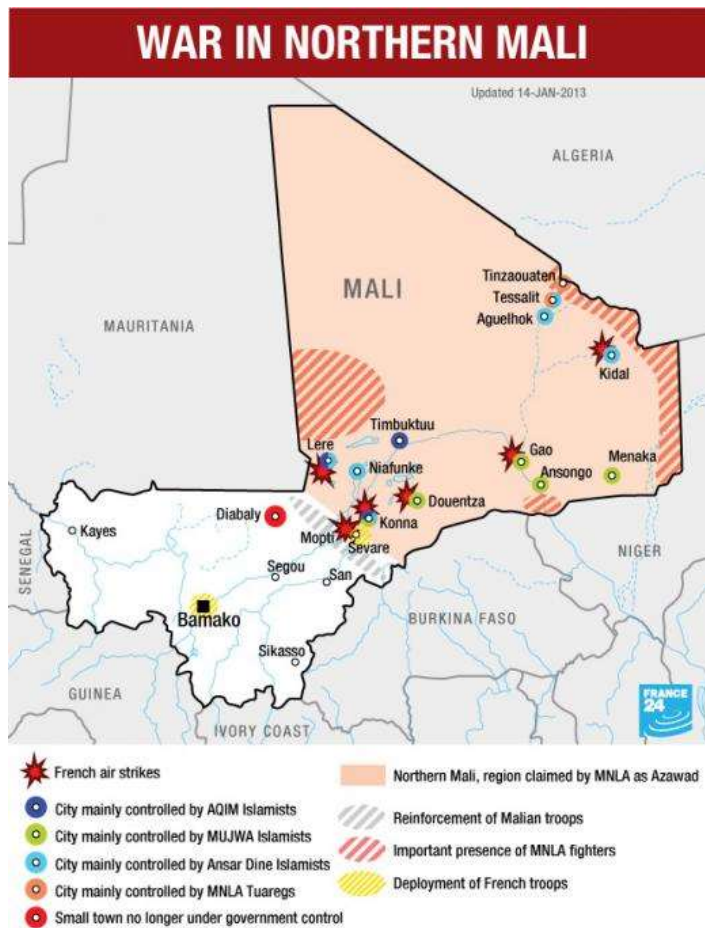
¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

the nature of warfare is changing. Moreover, given the fact that the Canadian Army has embraced the concept of maneuver warfare in its doctrine,²² it appears relevant to assess whether any of those concepts had an impact on Op Serval's outcome. As such, over the next section, Op Serval will be assessed based on how the French military employed speed and maneuver given since those two elements appear to best define maneuver warfare as a concept.



Operation Serval: Speed in decision and action

One factor of success generally agreed upon when one considers Op Serval is the speed with which the French deployed to the area of operations (AO) and the high tempo that they maintained throughout the military intervention. Given the importance of speed for maneuverist

²² Department of National Defence. Director of Army Doctrine. B-GL-300-001/FP-001, *Land Operations* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2008), Chapter 5, Section 10.

proponents, we will examine why the French were able to deploy so quickly and why they were able to maintain such a high tempo throughout the operation. More specifically, as part of this discussion, we will consider the French decision-making process, the organization of the tactical units and their approach to command and control.

The French government's decision to deploy a military force to Mali to strike the rebels that were proceeding southbound towards Bamako happened very quickly once the 'red line' was crossed. It should be noted that contingency planning had started back in April 2012 following the fall of Gao and Timbuktu to the rebels but back then, the French were still hoping that they would be able to rely on the support of European Union and the African Union.²³ Once the rebels and jihadists approached to less than 250 kilometers from Bamako however (the strategic 'red line'), the French had to act at the request of the Malian President and under the auspices of UN resolution 2085.²⁴ The quick French reaction was possible for three main reasons:²⁵ a very short and reactive chain of command; a network of French bases in Africa, and a rapid deployment high-readiness system called "Guépard."²⁶

Here, the reactivity of the French government and French forces need to be highlighted since the intervention started less than five hours after the meeting of the "Conseil de defense" mustered by the "Président de la République" on Friday, January 11 2013 at eleven thirty.²⁷ It was the French special forces stationed in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, that were the first to enter Mali at Diabali and Konna, to assist the Malian army in the defense of key terrains such as

²³ *Séminaire Art opératif: Ecole militaire le 3 juillet 2013, Verbatim*, (Paris: Ministère de la Défense, 2014), 41.

²⁴ *Séminaire Art opératif: Ecole militaire le 3 juillet 2013*, 41.

²⁵ MGen Olivier Tramond and LCol Philippe Seigneur. "Operation Serval Another Beau Geste of France in Sub-Saharan Africa?" *Military Review*, Nov-Dec 2014, 79. See also *Allocution du CEMA lors du colloque tactique de l'armée de terre*, 4 dec 2013 (Paris : Ministère de la défense, 2013).

²⁶ By February 5, 2013, the French had more than 4000 troops in Mali. See Shurkin, *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, 15.

²⁷ *Rapport d'information de l'Assemblée Nationale sur l'opération Serval au Mali* (Paris: Assemblée Nationale, July 18, 2013), 49.

Sevare's airport and Markala's bridge.²⁸ Less than 48 hours later, four Rafale fighter-bombers would cover more than 4000 kilometers and fly for more than 9 hours 30 to complete the first offensive raid of the campaign.²⁹ Arguably, the quick reaction of the French (i.e. the speed with which they completed their first OODA loop cycle) was a determinant factor in the success of Op Serval as it allowed the French to achieve a certain level of surprise against the enemy.

Colonel Mirikelam argues that as important as the swiftness of the decision-making process, was the clearness of the strategic end state and objectives.³⁰ Mirikelam's comment does not come as a surprise given this Clausewitz's famous principle:

The first, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish... the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that it is not. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive...³¹

France's objectives in Mali were threefold: stop the terrorist aggression; secure a country in which there are many thousand French people; and permit Mali to recover its territorial integrity.³² A fourth undeclared objective, but shared with the military was to free, if possible any French hostages held by AQIM.³³ Such clarity at the political and strategic level greatly facilitated military planning and execution and therefore also contributed to a high operational tempo.

Another factor that contributed to the high operational tempo of the French Army in Mali, as Shurkin notes was "France's practice of task organizing and fighting as effective and largely

²⁸ *Idem.*

²⁹ *Idem.*

³⁰ François Mirikelam, "Operation Serval: le retour à la manœuvre aéroterrestre dans la profondeur," *Réflexions Tactiques*, numéro spécial (Paris : Bibliothèque Défense et Sécurité, 2014), 6.

³¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 88.

³² Shurkin, *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, 8. See also Chevènement, Jean-Pierre et al. *Rapport d'information fait au nom de la commission des affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées (1) par le groupe de travail « Sahel », en vue du débat et du vote sur l'autorisation de prolongation de l'intervention des forces armées au Mali*. No 513 (Paris: Sénat, April 18, 2013), 12-13.

³³ *Idem.*

autonomous combined arms forces at the battalion level and below, specifically as SGTIAs and GTIAs, with the SGTIAs representing the basic building block of expeditionary forces.”³⁴ One of the hallmarks of the SGTIA Shurkin highlights:

Is its combined arms status, specifically the integration of fire support and fire support coordination capabilities. In Mali, the SGTIAs had at their disposal 120-mm mortars and 155-mm CAESAR howitzers, not to mention the guns on their armored vehicles. They also could call in and coordinate with attack helicopters and joint fires, in this case French Air Force Mirage F1 and Rafale fighters. SGTIAs all have at least two captains, with the second-in-command the designated fires coordinator.³⁵

One possible benefit of this approach Shurkin adds “is that the French Army is comfortable sending relatively small force packages into action,”³⁶ thereby making the force more agile, which once again enables speed of action.

This organization of the force is also in line with the concepts of maneuver warfare and decentralization of authority since at the SGTIA level, it is the lieutenants and the captains that lead the fight and combine effects. As stated earlier, speed in action requires that decision be made at the lowest possible level. But while it would appear that the French army adhered to the maneuverist approach in their force structure, and decentralization of authority it should be noted that for the first two weeks of the operation, all tactical activities were directed by the CPCO (Centre de planification et de conduite des opérations) in Paris.³⁷ Arguably however, this micromanagement by the CPCO in the initial strokes of the operation allowed for the seamless translation of strategic objectives into tactical actions and achieve a speed in action.

³⁴ SGTIA stands for ‘sous-groupement tactique interarmes’ (combined arms tactical subgroup, company size) and GTIA stands for ‘groupeement tactique interarmes’ (Combined Arms Tactical Group, battalion size). See Shurkin, *France’s War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, 27.

³⁵ *Idem.*

³⁶ *Idem.*

³⁷ Only following the securing of Timbuktu would the FHQ assume command of the operational level. See Frédéric Gout, *Libérez Tombouctou! Journal de Guerre au Mali* (Paris: Tallandier, 2015), 66.

Operation Serval's Strategy and Maneuver

In addition to the speed in execution and the maintenance of a high tempo, some argue that the overall strategy and the maneuvers employed by the French in Mali was a classic case of maneuver warfare.³⁸ To better assess whether it is the case or not, the paper will now discuss the overall French strategy in Mali and the maneuver employed.

According to Shurkin, the French strategy quickly materialized around two pillars. One was simply “to move as fast as possible,” both to save Bamako but also to destroy the enemy before it successfully scattered or slipped out of reach.³⁹ Some of the factors that enabled rapid action were highlighted above, but boldness, or what the French call ‘audace’ also appears to have played a key role.⁴⁰ If one accepts the fact that boldness (or ‘audacité’) “remains highly valued within French combat arms as an operational ideal,”⁴¹ it would indicate a continued preference of the French military, or for the French army at least, for focused offensive actions aimed towards achieving decisive results. According to Lind, such a philosophy is not contrary to maneuver warfare since its goal is invariably “to attain a decisive result.”⁴² As Hubin highlights:

Tout est conditionné par l’objectif de destruction de l’adversaire dans le minimum de temps afin de briser sa volonté d’action ou de réaction de manière à lui imposer la nôtre. [...] Ce mode de fonctionnement est efficace lorsqu’il se propose d’atteindre des objectifs concrets, identifiables et accessibles permettant de matérialiser le succès: s’emparer ou protéger une capitale.⁴³

³⁸ “Operation Serval: le retour à la manœuvre aéroterrestre dans la profondeur.” *Réflexions Tactiques*, numéro spécial 2014, 5. See also, Jean-Bernard Pinatel, “L’intervention au Mali révèle l’efficacité de l’école française de la guerre non-conventionnelle,” *Atlantico.fr*, March 18, 2013; Michael Shurkin, *France’s War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014), 10; and *Rapport d’information de l’Assemblée Nationale sur l’opération Serval au Mali* (Paris: Assemblée Nationale, July 18, 2013), 32.

³⁹ Shurkin, *France’s War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, 9. See also Gout, *Libérez Tombouctou! Journal de Guerre au Mali*, 58.

⁴⁰ *Allocution du CEMA lors du colloque tactique de l’armée de terre*, 4 dec 2013.

⁴¹ As cited in Shurkin, *France’s War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, 10.

⁴² Lind, “The Theory and Practice of Maneuver Warfare,” 13.

⁴³ Guy Hubin, “Réflexions sur la manœuvre future.” Chapter 15 in *Guerre et Manoeuvre: Héritage et renouveau*, edited by Christian Malis, 232-252 (Paris: Economica, 2009), 238.

What this also highlights however is that the French, and arguably most if not all Western militaries, continue to have a preference for hoplite type battle: clear, quick, extremely violent but decisive.⁴⁴ Yet, hoplite type battles originate from what Lind calls “first-generation warfare,” when engagements were characterized by linear engagements.⁴⁵

The second pillar of French strategy in Mali, as reported by Shurkin, “was the assumption that the fight would have to be conducted by ground forces, although within a combined arms and joint framework, akin to the American doctrine of Airland battle in depth.”⁴⁶ Yet, Durand reminds us that, while it may be related in some ways to maneuver warfare, the Airland battle should not be seen as a twin of former since it also contains elements of classical American strategic thought such as technological superiority and the preference for overwhelming firepower over maneuver.⁴⁷

Also and although Op Serval was accompanied by political and diplomatic maneuvering, it should become clear to the reader that most of the effect sought, at least for the first four months of the operation, were mainly focused on physical plane. On this point however, the *Canadian Manual of Land Operations* states that “the maneuverist approach is realized through the following activities and effects against an adversary: shaping understanding; attacking and undermining will; and shattering cohesion.”⁴⁸ Arguably, this requires more than physical effects.

It should be noted however that this strategy contained a significant amount of risk. Indeed, as highlighted by Shurkin: “deploying a relatively small and light force and moving it at a

⁴⁴ Dans la bataille hoplitique, “l’appareil c’est la phalange, formation comptacte d’infanterie qui s’engage en masse tel un coin pour percer le dispositif de l’adversaire. Au Coeur de ce système de combat se trouve le principe de concentration qui procure une puissance maximale à un instant donné.” See Hubin, “Réflexions sur la manoeuvre future,” 234.

⁴⁵ “The Theory and Practice of Maneuver Warfare,” 4.

⁴⁶ Shurkin, *France’s War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, 11.

⁴⁷ Durand, “Maneuver Warfare, entre Vietnam et Transformation,” 77.

⁴⁸ Department of National Defence. Director of Army Doctrine. B-GL-300-001/FP-001, *Land Operations* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2008), 5-65.

pace that strained men and machines alike pushed the limits of France's logistical and sustainment capabilities."⁴⁹ As such, it would appear that the French's tolerance for risk is higher than other Western militaries. As MGen Kiszely remarks: "maneuver warfare is inherently risky – in Luttwak's words, when it fails it fails 'catastrophically' and high risk is often politically very uncomfortable."⁵⁰ And yet, although the French army was sometimes "on the verge of catastrophe,"⁵¹ the gamble paid off, notably in Adrar Mountains.⁵² That being said, it is unlikely that the French would have taken as much risk in a multinational operation with allies with a different doctrinal approach.

Op Serval: A maneuver warfare success?

Given the above discussion, was Op Serval a successful application of maneuver warfare? For the French, there is no doubt that it was. For Pinatel, it is clear the "French success in Mali was principally due to the maneuverist spirit of French officers and their willingness to take on risks."⁵³ For the French sources cited in Shurkin's report, "it is the fast-paced operations and rapid movements that account for their success."⁵⁴ They also appear "satisfied that Serval went as well as they had hoped, notwithstanding their failure to liberate the hostages given the fact that they saved Bamako and the Malian state from imminent danger and enabled all of Mali's territory to come at least under nominal Malian control, with the arguable exception of Kidal."⁵⁵ With that in mind and given the good use of speed and surprise by the French and their display of 'audace' and offensive action throughout, one has to agree with those French supporters that Op Serval appears to be a successful application of maneuver warfare.

⁴⁹ Shurkin, *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, 9.

⁵⁰ E. N. Luttwak, "Strategy—The Logic of War and Peace," (Bellknap, Harvard UP, 1987): 95. As cited by Kiszely, "The meaning of manoeuvre," 39.

⁵¹ Gout, *Libérez Tombouctou! Journal de Guerre au Mali*, 147.

⁵² See Shurkin, *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, 9 and 22.

⁵³ Pinatel, "L'intervention au Mali révèle l'efficacité de l'école française de la guerre non-conventionnelle."

⁵⁴ Shurkin, *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

However, one critique could be that the French lacked maneuver in the psychological and cognitive or information planes in their pursuit of positional advantage. Indeed, one could argue that they focused too much on the destruction of the enemy through decisive engagements. After all, the Canadian *manual of Land operations* tells us that:

The manoeuvrist approach is most effective when applied against a conventional adversary. In some campaigns, such as a COIN, involving a fanatical insurgent movement, the manoeuvrist approach in terms of fires will have little effect. No amount of force or threat of force will convince the core insurgents to surrender, or to break their will and cohesion. [...] In such cases, the manoeuvrist approach on the psychological plane will be the only real manner in which to realize an enduring outcome. The majority of the populace and the less fanatical members of the adversary must be persuaded through influence activities not to support the insurgency. Thus, activities must counter adversary propaganda and media operations; they must build legitimacy and confidence in the campaign; and they must address the root causes of any reason for support to be given to the adversary.⁵⁶

Goya on the other hand, believes that the French used the right approach in this case since “AQIM could not rely on any local support that could allow it to quickly regenerate itself and did not possess any anti-access/area-denial weapons.”⁵⁷ In fact, he adds that the fact that the French forces accepted to engage the enemy in close combat and in their sanctuaries was probably a surprise for the jihadists.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

Napoleon allegedly remarked that the quality he looked for the most in his generals was that they be lucky. After all, given the risks the French ran, the outcome of Op Serval could have been quite different. Yet, the argument laid out above highlights the fact the French army’s did deliberately and successfully apply some aspects of maneuver warfare during Op Serval.

⁵⁶ B-GL-300-001/FP-001, *Land Operations* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2008), 5-67.

⁵⁷ Michel Goya, “Mali : l’intervention militaire française en perspectives,” *Diploweb.com*, June 21, 2013, 6.

⁵⁸ Goya, “Mali : l’intervention militaire française en perspectives,” 6.

That being, we should be careful in the lessons that we draw from it. First, local triumph does not necessarily translate into global success. Indeed, now that Serval is over, the French (and its allies) need to translate its military victory into stability for Mali and the greater Sahel, which promises to be a challenging problem for years to come. Second, Op Serval seems to illustrate ongoing trends in the conduct of warfare rather than a revolutionary approach to it. For one thing, Western militaries seem to continue to have a preference for clear, quick, violent but decisive hoplite type battle over complex maneuvering. This means the Canadian Armed forces need to continue to challenge their doctrinal concepts such as maneuver warfare, to ensure their relevancy in the contemporary operating environment.

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