

Article

Twenty-First Century Military Multilateralism: “Messy” and With Unintended Consequences

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Abstract

The current century has witnessed several high-profile Western military interventions in developing countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, and Mali/West Africa are well-known examples. All three were initiated unilaterally by the US or France but were soon supplemented with multilateral missions which operated in parallel with the unilateral intervention force, giving them a “messy” appearance. In the three cases, the foreign policy decision-makers in the US and France reacted mainly to domestic stimuli, most evidently in the case of the US, where revenge for 9/11 was a strong motive. Like-minded partners in NATO and troops from developing countries shared the burdens of the US and France and gave legitimacy to the military interventions. The consequences of the interventions were not that they contributed to stability. Rather they supported the incumbent elites, as they were able to avoid launching economic and political reform. The lack of reform undermined the prospects for stability.

Keywords

Afghanistan; conflict management; Iraq; Mali; multilateralism; terrorism; West Africa

Issue

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1. Introduction

The current century has witnessed several high-profile Western military interventions in developing countries. Among the well-known examples are Afghanistan from 2001 onwards, Iraq from 2003 onwards, and Mali/West Africa from 2013 onwards. All three were initiated by the US or France but soon they were supplemented with multilateral missions that operated in parallel with the unilateral intervention force. Marina Henke describes the US and France as “pivotal states” because of their active role in building multilateral coalitions (Henke, 2019). The “coexistence” of multilateral and unilateral military missions relied on significant numbers of troops from developing countries (Brosig, 2017; Williams, 2020). It coincided with developments where UN peace operations became increasingly robust (Karlsrud, 2019, pp. 2–3, 11–15) and where the extensive use of soldiers from developing countries became com-

mon while Western nations were able to provide fewer peacekeepers (Williams, 2020, pp. 482–483).

The characteristics of the three multilateral military interventions raise several questions. First, why did Western powers such as the US and France prefer multilateral missions while their first impulse seemed to be to act unilaterally, relying on their own national military power and command? Second, what were the consequences of involving troops, not only from “like-minded” countries but also from developing countries in these multilateral conflict management and peace operations? By answering the two questions, the article aims to contribute to the debate on what multilateralism involving military deployments in developing countries looks like in the twenty-first century. It also aims to contribute to the discussion on the implications of developing countries participating so actively in multilateral military operations.

The article launches three arguments aimed at answering the two questions. The first argument states

that the developments characterizing twenty-first century military multilateralism reflect what Western decision-makers perceive as core national interests. The second proposes that given the huge costs of military interventions, Western decision-makers perceive it to be in their best (national) interest to share these costs with others. Hence, they opt for multilateral cooperation that may involve “like-minded” actors, such as those in NATO and partners from developing countries. The third argument states that the incumbent elites in the developing countries affected by Western military interventions develop or already have strong interests in receiving training for their armed forces. They also have strong interests in receiving economic assistance from the West because it contributes to buttressing their power positions. The outcome of these different types of interests involved in the military interventions is multilateral cooperation that is messy—and not necessarily successful.

The remaining parts of the article are structured as follows: The next section presents the analytical approach with special emphasis on the characteristics of the new multilateralism of the twenty-first century and the analytical tools applied in the analysis. Then follows a brief overview of the three multilateral security operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Mali/West Africa. The interests of the big actors are addressed, including the issues of the interventions’ legitimacy and burden-sharing. The issue of burden-sharing with partners from developing countries is dealt with in a separate section, and in continuation of this, the interests of the rulers in developing countries are analyzed before the conclusion is made.

2. Multilateralism, National Interests, and Patrimonialism

Multilateral cooperation in connection with Western military interventions in developing countries is at the centre of attention in the article. Multilateralism of the twenty-first century is often described as “messy,” “modern,” or “new” by the position in the literature that makes a distinction between multilateralism under US hegemony and “post-hegemonic multilateralism” (Acharya, 2014; Hill & Peterson, 2013). One argument in the debate maintains that the US is no longer capable of playing the role of international hegemon, and therefore, the multilateralism of today is different from that of the past (Ikenberry, 2018; Smith, 2018).

An opposing argument presented by Mearsheimer (2019) disagrees strongly with the view that the US is in a non-hegemonic position in the current century. On the contrary, Mearsheimer maintains that the US has been the dominant international actor throughout most of the period under scrutiny. He even argues that during the “golden years” stretching up until 2004, the “liberal hegemon,” that is, the US tended to be “highly aggressive and adopted especially ambitious

agendas” (Mearsheimer, 2019, p. 32). During the “golden years,” the US intervened in both Afghanistan and Iraq, allegedly with the intention of “turning them into liberal democracies” (Mearsheimer, 2019, p. 33). However, from 2005 onwards, the liberal international order was going “downhill,” meaning that the US became less and less influential (Mearsheimer, 2019, pp. 28–31).

Despite the disagreements between Ikenberry and Mearsheimer, there seems to be considerable agreement that twenty-first century multilateralism is characterized by a “growing reliance on flexible, often purpose-built groupings of interested, capable, or like-minded” actors (Patrick, 2015, p. 120). It is a messy form of multilateralism which reflects a shift from purely intergovernmental models of cooperation to new frameworks that may be both transnational and multi-stakeholder (Patrick, 2015, pp. 120–122, 129–130). Julia Morse and Robert Keohane agree with the view that we are increasingly confronted with a new and much more messy type of multilateralism. The two authors suggest using the umbrella concept “contested multilateralism” to emphasize that the new situation is characterized by the role of competing coalitions and shifting institutional arrangements, both informal and formal (Morse & Keohane, 2014, pp. 386–389). In line with this, Christopher Hill and John Peterson find that “multilateralism is increasingly unwieldy,” describing it as “messy, disorderly and defective” (Hill & Peterson, 2013, p. 64; see also Bouchard et al., 2013).

Years ago, John Ruggie argued that multilateralism is “a generic institutional form of modern international life,” and as such, it has been around for many years, and therefore, it is not surprising that it is messy and disorderly (Ruggie, 1992, p. 567). Ruggie maintains that multilateralism in international relations is not merely about coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, as suggested by Robert Keohane’s original definition of multilateralism (Keohane, 1990, p. 732). Cooperation is based on certain principles organizing relations among the states, such as indivisibility, non-discrimination, and diffuse reciprocity (Ruggie, 1992, p. 567). The following analysis builds on the first step in Ruggie’s definition that multilateralism is a generic form of modern institutional life and thereby a crucial component in international relations. It also builds on the argument that multilateralism involves elements of reciprocity.

The definition focuses on states as the crucial actors in international relations and the “generic institutional form of modern international life” (Ruggie, 1992, p. 567). With the focus on states, and thereby on foreign policy decision-makers, the article finds it appropriate to apply an analytical framework that pays special attention to state actors. This article is inspired by theoretical reasoning that combines neoclassical realist thinking on foreign policymaking with the Foreign Policy Analysis approaches promoted by Christopher Hill, Chris Alden, and Amnon Aran (Alden & Aran, 2017; Hill, 2016; Ripsman et al., 2016). The inspiration implies that the

article maintains the realist conception that states and foreign policy decision-makers pursue national interests and do so within the constraints set by the international systemic structures. The article thus leans towards John Mearsheimer's interpretation of the international systemic conditions in the current century.

As far as the burden-sharing issue is concerned, Milner and Tingley argue that "principal-agency theory" can specify what is the national interest in this context as the theory refers to the importance of burden-sharing and risk-sharing when it comes to multilateral promotion of security in developing countries (Milner & Tingley, 2013; Ruggie, 1992, p. 586). The theory maintains that the "principal" or the "pivotal state" delegates tasks to an "agent," in this case, the armed forces of a coalition partner. Marina Henke finds that no single variable can explain the delegation of authority from the principal to the agent. Nevertheless, burden-sharing is a crucial motive for building international coalitions and thus for promoting multilateralism. Boosting legitimacy by inviting other states to participate in an intervention is also an important motive (Henke, 2019, pp. 134–135). Olivier Schmitt goes so far as to argue that "since the end of the Cold War, multilateralism has become a key factor legitimizing military interventions" (Schmitt, 2018, pp. 16–18). It is much easier to defend a military intervention in a developing country against domestic and international criticism if the international community appears to support such a drastic measure and that it is not merely a self-serving action.

Opting for multilateral solutions to military interventions in developing countries does not imply that such decisions are rational. Foreign policy decision-makers likely make decisions with a lack of knowledge and based on misconceptions, which aligns with the pluralist understanding of foreign policy decision-making promoted by Christopher Hill. It means that states or government decision-makers are not considered a single and coherent actor capable of rationally pursuing a clear-cut national interest. Rather, the pluralist position implies that the actual foreign policy behaviour may be incoherent and inconsistent—it may even be irrational (Hill, 2016, pp. 7–9, 12–17; Ripsman et al., 2016).

The assumption that governments are not necessarily coherent actors that pursue rational policies makes it possible that the approach might be useful not only in Western but also in developing countries. The developing countries dealt with in this article had all been through wars that undermined their formal political structures and whatever institutionalized frames that existed for politics before the outbreak of conflict. The post-conflict period in developing countries is typically characterized by state-building processes that give informal actors, such as clan leaders, chiefs, and warlords, considerable room for manoeuvre (Berdal & Zaum, 2013; Cheng, 2013).

It has been argued that many informal actors perceive reconstruction and state-building as a continuation

of war and a political competition to access resources by new means (Malejacq & Sandor, 2020, p. 559). It is a prominent argument in the literature that a strong driver for many decision-makers and politicians in developing countries is the survival of the incumbent regime, including the survival of the ruling elite (Alden & Aran, 2017, p. 94; Clapham, 1996). The high priority attached to regime survival often results in very limited reform and few policy changes because such initiatives may break up the existing patterns of domestic alliances and patron–client networks (Oliveira & Verhoeven, 2018, pp. 18–20).

A significant amount of literature about the countries and regions analyzed here suggests that it is useful to operate with patrimonialism and neopatrimonialism as core analytical concepts for understanding the behaviour of those politicians and policymakers that are strongly preoccupied with regime survival (Bach, 2011; Brosig, 2017; De Waal, 2009; Mehran, 2018). Patrimonialism is characterized by mutual dependency relationships between a limited number of strongmen or patrons and their followers, called clients (Bach, 2011; De Waal, 2009; Erdman & Engel, 2007; Mehran, 2018). Neopatrimonialism refers to a mixture of patrimonial and legal-rational bureaucratic domination in political systems characterized by state officials who exercise their power and authority based on their private interests and their private concerns (Bach, 2011, pp. 277–278; De Waal, 2009, pp. 101–103; Mehran, 2018, pp. 93–95). According to the analytical framework suggested here, stressing the significance of the exchange relationship between clients and elite actors or "big men" emphasizes the role of individual decision-makers, their interests, and motives in concrete decision-making situations (Hill, 2016, p. 65).

Summing up, the article applies a theoretical framework that combines the impact of the international systemic structures with the mediating role of domestic variables. The article aligns with the realist argument of John Mearsheimer that the two American-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq took place during the "golden years" of US global dominance that allowed the hegemon to pursue highly aggressive policies. In comparison, the French intervention in Mali took place when the liberal international order was "going downhill," and the Western powers faced increasing challenges to their legitimacy. Second, the article assumes that the perceptions of the important foreign policy decision-makers of the "national" interest are fluid, which may result in policies that are not rational. The understanding of decision-makers' behaviour in developing countries is based on the assumption that they are strongly preoccupied with securing the survival of the incumbent regime. The transfer of resources to these governments may lead to negative social, economic, and political consequences in the recipient states, as pointed out by Marina Henke (Henke, 2019, pp. 161–162).

3. Multilateral Security Operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Mali/West Africa

Following the terrorist attack on the US on 9/11, NATO invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, resulting in many years of foreign military involvement in Afghanistan. Since its start in October 2001, the military intervention in Afghanistan had been running on a dual-track (Hallams, 2009; Sperling & Webber, 2012). On the one hand, there was a unilateral operation led by the US, which centred on its strategic interests, and on the other hand, there was a multilateral mission led by NATO with the participation of several member countries such as the UK, Canada, France, Germany, and small states such as Norway and Denmark (Rynning, 2013).

The unilateral approach meant that the US maintained its ability to generate quick, flexible, and efficient responses to the enemy (Hallams, 2009; Sperling & Webber, 2012). The multilateral International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation was established with a UN mandate. It had participation from several NATO member states and contributions from several international organizations. The mission was oriented toward rebuilding government institutions and training the Afghan security forces (Carati, 2015, pp. 206–207). At one time, the ISAF included more than 130,000 troops from NATO countries and partner nations (Olsen, 2020, p. 62; Sperling & Webber, 2012).

In comparison, the unilateral American invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to one of the most serious crises in the transatlantic relationship since WWII because some European NATO member states, such as Germany and France, were strongly against the intervention (Garey, 2020). Nevertheless, after a few years, it was agreed that NATO should take over the training of Iraqi defence forces. The mission was established in 2008, with two overall goals: capacity building, non-combat training, and stabilization of Iraq aimed at preventing terrorism and, in particular, the re-emergence of ISIS (Olsen, 2020, pp. 69–70; Schafraneck, 2019).

Soon after 9/11, Africa and especially West Africa became one of the geographical regions where multilateral cooperation was considered an important tool for fighting terrorism. In the wake of 9/11, the US introduced several initiatives focusing on regional security where military training programs and funding for African armed forces became crucial components in the American Africa policy (Chivvis, 2016, pp. 44–48; Ploch, 2011, p. 23). When radical Islamists gained power in Northern Mali in 2012 and threatened to enter the capital Bamako in early 2013, the former colonial power, France, launched a military intervention force to eliminate the Islamist threat (Dieng, 2019; Wing, 2019).

The decision-makers in Washington found that the US had an interest in preventing the establishment of a safe-haven for the growth and operations of “Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb” in Northern Mali (interviews by the author in Washington DC in 2015; Larémont, 2013; Weltz,

2014, p. 609). Therefore, the US involved itself by assisting the French forces with air transport, air refueling, and the Americans stepped up their surveillance and intelligence activities in the region. The building of a \$110 million drone base in neighbouring Niger expressed the American commitment to fighting terrorism and radical Islamists in West Africa (Turse, 2020). The proactive American policy in West Africa resulted in the training of many thousands of African troops to perform peacekeeping and anti-terrorist operations on the continent (Pham, 2014, p. 262).

Summing up, the three interventions mentioned were promoted unilaterally by the US or France, making them “pivotal states.” However, all three operations very soon became multilateral under the command of NATO or the UN, operating in parallel with the unilateral missions under either American or French leadership. The unilateral missions were all strongly focused on fighting terrorism, whereas the multilateral operations were far more engaged in state-building activities and training of local security forces.

4. The Interests of the Big Actors

4.1. National Interests

The first argument of the article states that Western military interventions in developing countries during the first years of the twenty-first century were about taking care of what core Western decision-makers perceived as their national interest. The section scrutinizes the interests of the US and France based on the assumption that it can contribute to explaining why the two international actors intervened in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Mali/West Africa.

The strategic goals and the interests pursued by the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 were clear. From the start, it was apparent that the unilateral US invasion was not a crisis-management operation and that its main purpose was to retaliate against the 9/11 attacks and prevent al-Qaeda from threatening the USA (Garey, 2020, pp. 83–85, 90–92). The original aims and goals of the American mission in Afghanistan soon became conflated with additional vague and broadly defined ones like “state-building,” “counterinsurgency,” “winning hearts and minds,” “democratization,” “counterterrorism,” and “regional stabilization” (Carati, 2015, p. 203). It has been pointed out that to a large extent, the additional goals reflected the fact that the decision-makers in the US had no idea of what they had gotten themselves into when the US invaded Afghanistan apart from the aim of retaliating against the attacks of 9/11 (Russel, 2013, pp. 51, 55).

In the middle of the challenges confronting the combined unilateral and multilateral mission in Afghanistan, the US government under George W. Bush in early 2003 decided to invade Iraq unilaterally. American decision-makers claimed that the Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein had hidden its nuclear weapons from

the international inspectors that the UN had sent to verify or falsify the American assertions (Garey, 2020, pp. 123–128). Despite the fact that the American decision-makers were unable to provide any information to substantiate their claim of the Iraqi regime's access to nuclear weapons, the US launched an invasion of the country in March 2003 together with a limited number of allied states. It was an important aim for the American strategy to remove the old ruling elites by pursuing a so-called “de-Ba’athification” policy of the Iraqi government institutions, including the armed forces (Dodge, 2013, pp. 196–197). This supports Mearsheimer’s argument that the US pursued aggressive agendas during the golden years of liberal hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2019, pp. 32–33).

Since its decolonization in Africa, France has played a remarkably prominent role in managing several violent conflicts in West Africa. It was a natural consequence of the fact that France maintained its position on the continent in the entire post-colonial era (Chafer, 2014, p. 514; Vallin, 2015, pp. 93–97). As early as mid-2010, the foreign minister Francois Fillon stated “We are at war with al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb” (Knaup et al., 2012). The French government’s 2013 White Paper on “Defense and National Security” maintained that the security of France and Europe/the EU were closely interlinked. The White Paper indicated that political instability in the Sahel was not only a threat to France but certainly also to Europe at large (Chafer, 2014, p. 54). Bruno Charbonneau, an expert on security issues in the Sahel, argues that “the French, like the EU, are now concerned with how instability would result in migrants and illicit goods flowing to Europe” (Essa, 2017). The assessment is in line with the statements and official documents issued by the EU, including its different “Strategies on the Sahel” (European Council, 2016; European External Action Service, 2011). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the French decision-makers perceived launching operation “Serval” as taking care of national interests by reestablishing stability in Mali while contributing to curbing the influx of migrants and refugees into the EU.

Summing up, it appears that invading Afghanistan was an act of revenge which was not necessarily the same as taking care of US national security interests. However, the domestic pressure on the American foreign policy decision-makers to act was unquestionable. The decision-makers in Paris perceived preventing chaos in Mali and in the wider Sahel region to be in the national interest of France and in the interest of the EU. The Iraqi situation is far more challenging because the official reasons for invading the country were questioned from the start of the American campaign. It points towards an interpretation that the decision to invade Iraq resulted from a lack of knowledge or simply manipulation of facts. It was difficult to argue that it was taking care of US “national” interests, and at the same time, it raised serious questions about the legitimacy of the invasion.

4.2. Burden Sharing With “Like-Minded” Countries

It is characteristic both in the run-up to, and during the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, like-minded countries in the NATO alliance got to play important roles. The presence of NATO in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq was supposed to provide legitimacy among domestic and international audiences. Julie Garey argues that “the United States pursued NATO participation to legitimize its actions and adhere to norms governing the use of force and conflict engagement” (Garey, 2020, p. 213). No doubt, the participation of the UK, France, and Germany sent a clear signal to the American domestic audience as well as to the international community that there was widespread political support for the military operations in Afghanistan (Schmitt, 2018, pp. 138–148). The same was the case concerning the highly controversial invasion of Iraq, where the UK very strongly backed the American undertaking together with Australia and Italy, giving it a tinge of legitimacy (Schmitt, 2018, pp. 104–137).

There were also clear motives about burden-sharing involved in encouraging like-minded partners to participate in the operations in the two countries (Henke, 2019, pp. 145–147). Initially, the ISAF-NATO mission was deployed in Kabul to defend government institutions, and was conceived as a mission to help rebuild government institutions and train the Afghan security forces (Carati, 2015, p. 207). The European NATO allies within ISAF brought invaluable skills to strengthen the stabilization and reconstruction efforts, thereby demonstrating the potential utility of multilateralism for taking care of some American interests in promoting stability and security in developing countries (Garey, 2020, pp. 214–220).

The goals of the multilateral ISAF mission were to a large extent undermined by the unilateral American policy. Several years into the intervention, under the Obama administration, it was so pronounced that it was described as a “re-Americanization” of the conflict (Carati, 2015, p. 215). The outcome was not just poor coordination but also a lack of communication and sometimes open conflict between the US-led mission and the ISAF. The tense disagreements partly reflected the lack of consensus among the US and NATO partner countries about the goals of the foreign military engagement in Afghanistan (Carati, 2015, pp. 203, 207; Sperling & Webber, 2012, p. 355).

Despite the strong disagreement between the US and not least France and Germany about the launch of the war on Iraq, NATO ended up agreeing to offer training to Iraqi security forces in late 2004 (Garey, 2020, p. 212; Hallams, 2009, pp. 51–53). The NATO mission (NMI) operated alongside an EU Advisory Mission (EUAM) supporting security reform in Iraq. In February 2021, NATO’s defence ministers decided to expand their training mission in Iraq from 500 soldiers to around 4,000 to 5,000 troops. The increase in numbers did not involve US personnel, meaning that NATO’s European members would

increasingly take over some of the training activities previously carried out by the US (Emmott, 2021).

Soon after the launch of operation “Serval” in Mali, it was backed by 2,000 troops from Chad, turning it into a multilateral operation. France opted for a multilateral approach in parallel to its military operations to avoid having sole responsibility for maintaining security and for fighting Islamist radicalization. Thus, the reasons for the French push for multilateralism and multilateral military solutions to the many crises in West Africa were very pragmatic. It was about burden-sharing, and a quest for legitimacy (Erforth, 2020, pp. 572–575; Recchia & Tardy, 2020, pp. 478–479). As a consequence of the French wish to share the burden and risk, the UN mandated a multilateral mission with more than 10,000 soldiers and 2,000 police officers with headquarters in Bamako, Mali (Dieng, 2019).

In sum, the Afghan case seems to contradict the argument of John Mearsheimer that Washington was keen to get support from like-minded countries as far as burden-sharing and legitimacy were concerned. Because the intervention took place during the “golden years” of the liberal international order, it is at least puzzling. Despite the strong commitment by many European NATO partners that gave legitimacy to the mission, the US largely pursued its own narrow goals without consideration for the concerns of its partners. The unilateral US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 supports this assessment. It suggests that some American decision-makers had not acknowledged that the “golden years” of American international dominance were over and that multilateral cooperation in the twenty-first century was also about behavioural norms and reciprocity. Because of the massive resistance to the invasion of Iraq, the international support of the controversial American move was not only a necessity—receiving it was a success. In the Mali case, multilateral missions were launched to share the burden and give legitimacy to the interventions, and Paris was successful in both respects.

4.3. Burden-Sharing With Partners From Developing Countries

The Afghan National Army (ANA) was the centerpiece of NATO’s military strategy in Afghanistan (Grissom, 2013, p. 263). The alliance devoted substantial resources to building and training the ANA, and over the years, its numbers expanded to reach 171,000 men in 2011 (Grissom, 2013, p. 268). The training program for the Afghan National Security Forces was intensified to make them capable of taking over responsibility for security from NATO and thereby sharing the alliance’s costs of maintaining stability and security in the country (Carati, 2015, p. 214).

By 2011, ANA’s operational effectiveness was unsatisfactory seen from NATO’s perspective. It was the case, despite heavy US and NATO investments in the training of the Afghan soldiers and the provision of new weapons

and other supplies. Some of the reasons were linked to limitations in training and weapons, but NATO sources also emphasized corruption as a core reason (Grissom, 2013, pp. 273–274). Neither corruption at all administrative levels nor the challenges from poor governance and a broken judicial system were addressed because of the strong American focus on counterinsurgency in the training programs for the ANA. It meant that the broader socio-political context in Afghanistan was not considered (Carati, 2015, p. 214).

Because of the removal in Iraq of the Ba’athist security forces, Washington had to spend significant efforts on training, equipping, and supporting the new Iraqi armed forces, and by 2009, the Iraqi security forces employed a total of 645,000 personnel. The rapid remilitarization of the Iraqi state and its relations with its own society was pushed through by the US as an attempt to limit the casualties for its own troops and reduce the domestic political costs of occupying Iraq (Dodge, 2013, pp. 204–207). However, the Western training of the security forces reinforced the already existing institutional fragmentation and the politics of patronage in these institutions (Bizhan, 2018, p. 1020). On top of this, the dissolution of the Iraqi army worsened the security situation in the country, manifesting itself in a continuing fight against al-Qaeda. Therefore, the US also established and supported tribal militias, which included 100,000 members (Bizhan, 2018, p. 1023).

The French military intervention in Mali backed by troops from Chad very quickly led to the defeat of radical Islamists in the northern part of the country (Dieng, 2019; Wing, 2019). The proactive American policy towards West Africa was part of the American global war on terror (Burgess, 2015, p. 211). In line with the American effort, the EU established no less than three multilateral missions, one of which, EUTM Mali, was explicitly aimed at training the Malian armed forces (Pirozzi, 2013, p. 16–17).

Adding to the complex picture of military interventions in Mali and West Africa, the attempts to turn operation “Serval” into a multilateral mission resulted in the establishment of a French-led but still multilateral operation named “Barkhane” headquartered in Chad. The “Barkhane” aimed to secure the region and fight terrorism in partnership with regional actors; it involved joint operations between French troops and soldiers from Mali, Niger, and Chad (Larivé, 2014). The high priority given to promoting security in West Africa/the Sahel was emphasized by the establishment in 2017 of the so-called “G5 Sahel Force.” This 5,000 strong military unit with the aim to fight terrorism, organized border crime, and human trafficking. The participating partners include five West African countries plus France. The funding came from the EU, France, and the US (Dieng, 2019, pp. 485–487; Dörrie, 2019, p. 2; Essa, 2017).

In sum, the analysis in this section has shown that the burden-sharing and risk-sharing interests of the US and France resulted in extensive training of and cooperation

with troops from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Mali/West Africa, along with the transfer of significant economic resources in particular to Afghanistan and Mali. The thesis of pivotal states helps explain the expansion of the number of participating states in the multilateral military operations in the three cases analyzed. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the three examples of twenty-first century multilateralism did not provide stability or remove the threat from terrorism as was predicted (Hill & Peterson, 2013, pp. 64, 67).

5. The Interests of Rulers in Developing Countries

The third argument of the article states that the political power holders and the incumbent elites in developing countries exposed to Western military intervention have strong interests in receiving training for their troops and economic assistance from the very same Western powers. It is because this type of support buttresses their power positions and thereby the survival of the incumbent regime (Brosig, 2017; Fischer, 2013; Oliveira & Verhoeven, 2018).

The ANA was an important institution within a broader societal and political context permeated by patrimonial networks that included both officers and individuals. It has been pointed out that many officers in the ANA spent significant amounts of time and energy managing the patronage networks within the army which appeared deeply distracted by these machinations (Grissom, 2013, p. 278). Apparently, many officers were wary of disciplining subordinates connected to networks and powerful patrons outside the army who routinely prevented action from being taken against “their guys” (Grissom, 2013, p. 278). In brief, the patronage system distorted the discipline in the armed forces and distorted the system of military justice. The Western instructors that trained the members of the ANA had a hard time understanding where the loyalties and other affinities were placed when it came down to the individual soldier (Malejacq & Sandor, 2020, p. 558).

Official development assistance to Afghanistan rose 50-fold during the first 10 years of Western presence, but after 2016, it started to drop. It has been argued that although the large influx of development aid pushed rapid economic growth, it also promoted corruption and funnelled revenue to criminals and insurgent groups (Bizhan et al., 2018, pp. 971–972). The enormous sums of economic and military assistance buttressed the power base of several Afghan strongmen giving them an incentive to pursue a policy of “business as usual,” impeding the peace demands (Smith, 2020, p. 16). It suggests that the ruling elite in Afghanistan took care of its interests by receiving funding and training of its soldiers from the West. Also, pursuing “business as usual” policies in Afghanistan seems to have impeded the implementation of reforms.

When it comes to Iraq, Nematullah Bizhan maintains that the American invasion induced state failure

because of its policy of “de’Ba’athification.” Before the invasion, Iraq was characterized by a highly centralized government that used repression as a core instrument to maintain its power. The subsequent failure of a Western-inspired state-building project was largely the result of American policy initiatives that disrupted the Iraqi state’s preexisting capacity and undermined the prospect for effective state-building by cleansing the government institutions of former loyalists of the Saddam Hussein regime (Costantini & Cozzolino, 2020). Despite the centralization of power, the Iraqi elite was fragmented while, at the same time, it was using the politics of patronage as an important tool of distribution of resources and favours (Bizhan, 2018). As in the Afghan case, the power position of the elites in Iraq was strengthened because of the inflow of resources from the West and the distribution of resources that took place via patron–client mechanisms. It implies that the Western-inspired state-building project was undermined suggesting that necessary reforms of the Iraqi society faced serious problems when it came to implementing any reform (Costantini & Cozzolino, 2020).

In the wake of the French military intervention in Mali in 2013, Paris focused solely on the pursuit of Islamist rebels in the North and was careful not to get involved in domestic politics (Wing, 2019, pp. 100–102). The continued French and UN military presence in Mali in combination with the inflow of resources from the West provided disincentives for Southern-based elites in the country to undertake profound institutional and political restructuring that could have contributed to maintaining peace (Tull, 2017, pp. 2–3; Wing, 2017, pp. 190–192). Moreover, the international partners were unlikely to push for domestic reform, as long as the Malian government was perceived as a crucial ally in the war on terror (Wing, 2017, p. 193).

In sum, the incumbent elites in the three countries and their local allies and clients received significant economic and military assistance from the West. The external resources and the patrimonial systems strengthened the power position of the different elites and strongmen, which contributed to their inclination to abstain from major reforms. The generous inflows of resources from the West also contribute to explaining why the incumbent elites in the three countries were prepared to share the burden and the risk with the intervening military forces.

6. Conclusion

The article started by asking why the US and France took the initiative to launch several military interventions in developing countries in the current century and why the two Western powers seemed to prefer multilateral cooperation in these interventions. The article also asked what the consequences were of involving troops from developing countries in military operations. By answering these two questions, it aims to contribute

to the debate on what multilateralism involving military interventions in developing countries looks like in the twenty-first century. It also aims to contribute to the debate on the wider implications of multilateralism that involves troop contributions from developing countries in military operations.

In the three cases, the decision-makers in the US and France reacted to international and domestic stimuli. Because of the terrorist attacks on the US on 9/11, the US had to respond to the violent attacks on its soil, and the military invasion of Afghanistan was an apparent move. Afghanistan was hardly a threat to US national security but, the domestic pressure on the American decision-makers to act was unquestionable. Likewise, the French decision-makers felt they had to react to the Islamist take-over of power in Northern Mali in 2012. The military intervention in Mali in early 2013 was clearly perceived as being in the national interest of France and Europe at large. When it comes to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, it is far more convincing to explain the invasion as the result of domestic pressure in the US and, as such, as an element in taking revenge after 9/11. Of course, the two American-initiated invasions can also be seen as a reflection of the “golden years” of US unilateral power.

Second, it may very well be rational and in the national interest of the US and France to share the burden with many other actors. NATO appears to be a surprisingly willing and capable partner both in Afghanistan and Iraq, where it also gave legitimacy to the interventions. It was hardly necessary if the argument of John Mearsheimer is accepted that the US and its allies had much legitimacy during the “golden years” of liberal internationalism (Mearsheimer, 2019, p. 25). In Mali/West Africa, other partners were willing to contribute to stabilizing the country and the region. The analysis of the three interventions contributes to explaining why multilateral military missions in the current century appear messy—it is simply due to the many participants from the West and developing countries. The many partners and the unclear goals of the military operations may also contribute to explaining why they have had such limited success in creating peace and stability.

Third, the analysis showed that burden-sharing was not only in the interest of the Western powers. The incumbent elites in the three countries analyzed here were strongly interested in cooperating with the intervening Western forces because they received weapons, ammunition, and training for their armed forces and police. On top of this, the governments received significant amounts of development aid and economic assistance. The combined consequences of the Western assistance were support of authoritarian governments, and with this support, it was easier for them to avoid implementing economic and political reform.

Now, returning to the article’s contribution to the debate on what multilateral military interventions look like in developing countries in the twenty-first century and to the debate on the implications of developing

countries being so active participating in military operations. The interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq suggested that they were more about domestic circumstances and taking revenge than promoting stability in the two countries. On the other hand, the intervention in Mali was more clearly about promoting stability, preventing the spread of Islam, and curbing migration into Europe. The military interventions did not establish stability in any of the three countries. Rather, the consequences of the extensive Western involvement were to buttress the power positions of the incumbent, authoritarian elites and thereby, the West supported the inclination of these elites to refrain from initiating necessary socio-economic and political reforms. In brief, the multilateral military interventions were not only messy; they undermined the prospect for stability.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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