



AFRICA POLICY BRIEF

Belgian Troops for Takuba: What's at Stake?

Nina Wilén

Belgium is once again considering a significant troop contribution to one of the French-led military operations in the Sahel region - this time Task Force Takuba. Recent years' discussions have stimulated debate about the risks and benefits linked to such a deployment but failed to result in any political consensus. Against this background, this brief answers the questions: What? Why? and So What?

Over the past few years, there have been discussions about whether Belgium should contribute troops to French military operations in the Sahel region. First, the discussion concerned the possible deployment of troops to the regional counter-terrorist operation Barkhane, but lukewarm political enthusiasm for such a contribution and [Barkhane's subsequent transformation](#) has turned the spotlight to the more recently developed Taskforce Takuba, a force composed by Special Forces troops from several European states, with the aim to assist,

advice and accompany the Malian military (FAMA).

Bilaterally, Belgium has privileged military collaboration with Niger with the creation of a light-foot print military operation since the end of 2017: [Operation New Nero](#). Politically, the opening of [new embassies in Mali and Niger](#), the appointment of a Belgian Special Envoy for the Sahel and the drafting of an internal "Political Note for the Sahel", has symbolized the political weight given to the sub-region, while an increased number of [development projects](#) conducted primarily by the Belgian development agency ENABEL, has made it clear that Belgium is attempting to implement the politically attractive [comprehensive approach](#) in the region. The envisaged contribution of troops to Task Force Takuba follows therefore an already heavy engagement in the troubled region, yet has provoked a political debate about the interest and the risks linked to such a contribution, more specifically evoking the questions: What? Why? And: So What?

WHAT?

Fully operational [since April 2021](#), Taskforce Takuba's main objective is to improve the capacity of the Malian military to conduct operations against non-state armed groups in Mali. It is thus what in military terms is called an Advice, Assist and Accompany (3A) mission, which practically means that the European partner forces are both there to train Malian units and to accompany them in theater. The focus on improving local forces' capacities has been underlined during the current transformation of Barkhane. So far, six Malian Light Reconnaissance and Intervention Units (ULRI) of approximately 90 troops each, have been trained and equipped by the Task Force, including with motorcycles, which is considered the [innovative aspect of the units](#). The ULRIs have subsequently been conducting operations against armed non-state actors in the highly instable [three border region Liptako-Gourma](#), together with the partner forces.

Takuba is, contrary to Barkhane, not a regional mission, but mainly concentrating on Mali and the Malian armed forces. It has, nevertheless a mandate to operate in Niger as well, which was evidenced by [operation Solstice](#) in the summer of 2021, which took place between Ouallam in Niger and Menaka in Mali. Takuba also differs from Barkhane in the sense that while part of the aim is to combat 'negative forces' in the region, the Task Force does not set up its own CONOPS (Concepts of Operations) for targeting missions, yet can be tasked by Barkhane to capture targets in their zone of

operations. Primarily then, the Force conducts 3A missions and special reconnaissance operations.

While hailed as a [European defense project](#), the Task Force remains a French-led force, which falls under Barkhane's command, in spite of the fact that it currently has a [Swedish Force Commander](#) and contributions from several European states. France has however made it clear that the long-term objective is to increase the number of European troops while decreasing the French contribution but maintaining the overarching command. Currently, the Task Force is made up of about 800 troops from different European states, including Estonia, Czech Republic, Portugal, Sweden Italy, and Belgium, the latter which at the moment contributes two liaison officers and a [surgeon](#) to the Task Force. Other states which are planning to [contribute and participate](#) in discussions include Norway, Denmark, Hungary, Romania, Lithuania, Germany and the Netherlands, the latter which will replace the Swedish QRF (Quick Reaction Force) at the end of 2022, beginning of 2023. France remains the main contributor as the framework nation, with approximately 500 troops.

The Force is primarily composed by Special Forces units from the different contributing states, although neither the training, nor the operations necessitate Special Forces per se. Portraying the Task Force as a Special Forces mission has however other, political, advantages. It is [easier to attract partner nations](#) to contribute troops when it is 'sold'

as a Special Forces force, partly because it remains a relatively ‘light’ footprint in comparison to the heavier Barkhane operation and thereby makes it easier to both deploy and pull out forces. Partly, because politically it is easier to accept risks for Special Forces units than conventional units.

Belgium’s planned contribution does however not come from the Special Operations Regiment, but from the motorized brigade. The deployment of a Combined Arms Tactical Subgroup (CATSG) is supposed to be progressive, starting from approximately 165 troops mid-2022 to 255 at the end of the year depending on the political and security context in the region. Currently, the envisioned roles for the Belgians entail force protection, including logistics convoys, and support behind the front line for the European and local partners as well as advising and assisting FAMA. While such roles most likely have been chosen to diminish risks, recent mob [attacks on a Barkhane convoy](#) in Burkina Faso and Niger have shown that there is no ‘zero risk’ task, especially not in the current security environment.

WHY?

A deployment to Barkhane or Takuba has been on the table for at least the past two years, yet both political and military factors have so far prevented it from taking place. Politically, there has been little appetite to enter into a unilateral French-led force such as Barkhane, both because of the risk of being associated with [rising anti-French](#)

[sentiments](#) in the region, which could potentially have negative spill-over effects for other Belgian operations, but also because of the limited influence Belgium would have on the direction of the operation. In addition, given its [history in the Great Lakes region](#), Belgium has taken up a highly risk-averse position with regards to military operations on the continent.

Militarily, in 2021, it was also difficult to deploy such a large contingent, due to budget and logistical constraints, but also given Belgium’s heavier involvement in Maradi in Niger with Operation New Nero and the reconnaissance unit in MINUSMA. However, since Belgium’s training of Nigerien troops in Maradi [ended earlier this year](#), to be continued with a smaller mission in Torodi, and domestic Operation Vigilante Guardian is finished, there are clearly enough Belgian troops available to contribute to other missions in the region. In fact, from a military perspective the deployment of a CATSG during 2022 would make sure that the number of deployed troops at least equals 500, according to some, a symbolic figure for the Defense, as a lower deployment per year would provoke questions regarding function and size of the army as a whole. From an internal Defense perspective, contributing troops to Takuba will also allow for much-awaited operational experiences abroad for Belgian troops who have been tied up in the domestic [counter terrorism operation Vigilante Guardian](#) (OVG), during the past six years, and implicitly help retain, and possibly also recruit new forces.

On the political side, the [‘Europeanisation’](#), as French authorities aptly have called it, of Task Force Takuba makes it easier for Belgium to engage troops under French command. It also makes it possible, at least partially, to consider the contribution under Belgium’s engagement for multilateralism and slogan of being a credible and reliable partner. This, while at the same time increasing cooperation and interoperability with the French, with whom Belgium has several different projects, including CaMo, the [Franco-Belgian strategic partnership](#), and the [Joint declaration to fight terrorism](#) in November this year. Practically, it is a clear advantage that Belgium can send a French-speaking contingent, a feat that most of the other European states cannot do, yet which significantly facilitates communication with local forces, and avoids the need to team up with French forces only for language reasons.

The recent discussions between the Malian transitional government and Russian Private Military Company (PMC) Wagner Group have also intensified concerns about non-Western influence in the region, and more specifically, a Russian presence on both Europe’s Eastern and Southern flanks. While Russia’s relationship with [Mali is not new](#), the entrance of Wagner on the Sahelian scene worries observers of the [group’s trajectory](#) in the Central African Republic. Reports have documented significant [human rights abuses](#) from the Russian instructors, while parts of the CAR army now are rumored to not only be trained, but also commanded by the PMC. As France is

reducing its presence in Mali, European states will either have to fill the gap or accept that other, non-European actors do.

SO WHAT?

From a macro perspective, critics have voiced concern about the effectiveness of an operation like Takuba on the situation on the ground. Almost [eight years of external military operations](#) have seemingly had little effect on the stability of the region, and the risk of getting involved in a never-ending operation, or what has been called “[France’s Afghanistan](#)” has frightened politicians. Both military and political actors also seem to agree that there is no military solution to the many intersecting crises that the Sahel region is facing today. Yet, even for its proponents, Takuba is not seen as a panacea to the instability in the region. Rather it is seen as a means to gain time for a political solution by containing the most urgent threats emanating from armed rebel and terrorist groups. A way to gradually improve the capacity of the Malian armed forces to be able to control the situation in the medium to long term.

While Afghanistan is not Mali nor the Sahel, and the contexts differ, the Taliban’s rapid take over after twenty years of security force assistance to the Afghan forces, has nevertheless reinforced question marks regarding the possibility to rebuild and [reform security sectors](#) from the outside-in. Especially so, in a climate where [civil-military relations](#) are highly imbalanced, following no less than three coups and one coup attempt in the region over the past 16 months.

Question marks also remain about how much control and responsibility external partner forces can, or should, have over local forces' behavior in the theatre. The Malian military, FAMA, has a [somber track record](#) of human rights abuses, which paradoxically makes it both more important, and at the same time, less appealing to advise, assist and accompany. A possible collaboration between the Malian government and the Wagner group also raises new questions regarding the willingness of European troops to collaborate with the Russian mercenaries, especially following [EU's recent imposition](#) of sanctions on the PMC - which seems to serve both as a lessons learned from other places and a warning for Malian authorities.

Finally, question marks remain about the outcome of forthcoming [elections in France](#) and Mali next year. While the Malian elections are likely to be significantly delayed – if taking place at all - France's elections will regardless result in a “new” President in the spring and possibly also a reshuffle of France's presence in the Sahel region.

Takuba remains a means for Belgian Defense to gain operational experience and for Belgium to politically show solidarity with both France and Sahelian and European partners. Takuba is also likely to

remain a “pull and plug” operation, for better or for worse, meaning that European contributing states can both choose when and where to plug in capacities, but also to pull out, when no longer capable or willing to maintain forces. The Swedish withdrawal of the Quick Reaction Force in February 2022 is evidence of this. Yet, there should be no illusion that Takuba will significantly change the security situation on the ground, as long as the political efforts do not follow suit. The Sahel crises are complex, intersecting, and profound and need responses that mirror this reality. Takuba is but one facet of such an answer.

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The author warmly thanks colleagues and the many officials, diplomats and military officers who commented on the draft version of this policy brief for their valuable contribution.



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