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# The Strong ‘Weak State’: French Statebuilding and Military Rule in Mali

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on newly collected empirical data, this article explores the complex long-term political relationship between the state and the military in Mali. It argues that post-2013 French intervention has lacked an understanding of the place of the military within state structures. This led to an approach to statebuilding premised on the false idea that Mali has historically been a weak state, with weakness defined in military terms. It challenges this understanding and provides a counterargument rooted in a historical approach. It highlights how the French focus on military strengthening post-2013 inadvertently created the conditions for the 2020 coup d'état.

## KEYWORDS

Mali; intervention; statebuilding; historical turn; France; SSR

## Introduction

This article attempts to highlight critical insights from the French military intervention in Mali (2013–present), specifically how this intervention set the conditions for military (re)capture of the Malian state. The French focus on state weakness as the root of Mali's ills led to a counterproductive emphasis on military strengthening and counterterrorism which further destabilised civilian authority. Specifically, French policies gave the Malian army the strength, the opportunity, and the permissive international environment required for the successful coup d'état of August 2020. These three necessary conditions are elaborated through an interdisciplinary approach which draws on political science and history to reveal how complex processes of state formation and development intersect. Processes of state formation and development are by definition long-term and, previously, in the case of Mali not easily captured due to significant gaps in the archival record post-1960. This article takes on this challenge of the *longue durée* through analysis of a new collection of more than 10,000 diplomatic archival documents from six states covering the period from Malian independence until the French military intervention in 2013. It supplements this historical record with subsequent primary and secondary material (newspaper articles, press releases, reports) to carry the analysis through to the present.

French and European forces have been actively deployed in support of the Malian state since 2013, yet the situation continues to deteriorate (Raleigh, Nsaibia, and Dowd 2020).

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Despite early hopes (Shurkin 2014), there is a recognition that both direct French military intervention (Guichaoua 2020) and European security sector reform in Mali have been unsuccessful (Tull 2019; Marsh and Rolandsen 2021). After seven years of international strengthening, the Malian state suffered a coup d'état (Gazeley 2020) and its basic viability in its current territorial form is open to question (Craven-Matthews and Englebret 2018).

Despite the broad range of international security and development actors present within the Mali conflict – and the wider Sahel ‘security traffic jam’ (Cold-Ravnkilde and Jacobsen 2020) – this article focusses on France as the most significant external state-builder. The UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA (Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) has an independent role but its mandate has been significantly shaped by France, the pen holder on Mali at the UN. Equally, the presence of European Union missions and significant numbers of troops from EU member states and the United Kingdom is more reflective of French influence than of their genuine interest in Mali itself. For this reason, an analysis of the theoretical framework within which French statebuilding has been conceptualised is potentially valuable for understanding a range of other secondary actors that are also shaped by this framework, but with which this article does not engage directly due to limitations on space.

First, this article briefly outlines critical scholarly engagement with military-focussed approaches to statebuilding and the concept of state weakness, both in general and in the Malian case. It then challenges the utility of this framework for Mali by demonstrating that the Malian state has not been historically ‘weak’ in military terms and has on the contrary shown consistently high levels of military spending. The article then explores this apparent contradiction by tracing the history of the state–military relationship in Mali since independence. The final section focusses specifically on how French policy post-2013 recreated the conditions for a return to military rule with a paired analysis of the 1968 and 2020 coups d'état.

### **Military-focussed statebuilding**

The post-9/11 history of international statebuilding has been shaped by an understanding of the state as the organising unit of international order (Aaronson et al. 2016, 6, 8, 12). This state-centric understanding has identified weak or fragile states as a potential threat to the international system (Barakat and Larson 2014, 24). Weak states, or ‘ungoverned spaces’ within states, have been conceptualised since 9/11 as a source of insecurity which facilitates rebellion, terrorism, and transnational criminal networks by providing secure bases away from state oversight (Aning and Pokoo 2014, 2; Bleck and Logvinenko 2018, 601; Bøås 2015, 300). This understanding has been challenged in the academic literature as both shallow and universalistic (Barakat and Larson 2014; Bøås 2015; Raineri and Strazzari 2015, 250) and critiqued for favouring particularly securitised policy choices (Barakat and Larson 2014; Zimmermann 2017, 226). Raleigh et al. are particularly critical of this understanding in the context of the Sahel, arguing that rather than problematic state military weakness, it is in fact predatory and arbitrary exercises of power that have acted as a major driver of recruitment for rebel groups (Raleigh, Nsaibia, and Dowd 2020, 8).

The relatively disappointing outcomes from twenty-first century statebuilding endeavours have given significant weight to these criticisms and intensified academic debate over how much, if indeed any (see Call 2008), of the weak states framework remains analytically useful. Nevertheless, this conceptual framework has clearly shaped the French approach to statebuilding in Mali (2013–20). The 2013 French National Assembly report into military intervention in Mali firmly embedded this understanding of Mali's state weakness as the root of the problems in the country (Guilloteau and Nauche 2013, 15). This state weakness was defined as an absence of the coercive elements of the state (courts, police, military) in certain areas, which led French interveners to pursue policies to restore this presence as a priority (Ministère des Armées 2020).

That postcolonial states have frequently been described as weak – often by their former colonisers and the international institutions they dominate – likely reflects the dilemma that such states inherit from their colonial predecessor. The high costs of compelling obedience to the state from a dispersed population across a large territory (see Cooper 2002, 2014; Herbst 2000; Dorman 2018) almost necessarily led the colonial state to take on the form, if not always the precise modality, described by Dodge in British colonial Iraq (1921–32) as *hakumat al tayarra* (government by aircraft). This form of the state functions as a structure for punishing non-compliance in the periphery with the will of the centre (Dodge 2006). However, state strength requires more than just the ability to militarily punish non-compliance. For Crawford Young:

At the most basic level, the state is expected to assure prosperity and to protect civil society from its enemies, whether foreign aggressors or domestic perturbers of the public order. Sustained failure to achieve these ends calls into question the fitness of the incumbent set of human agents directing the apparatus of rule. (Crawford Young 1997, 34)

From this perspective, the return of previously incumbent elites to power in Mali under the protection of French and international military power in 2013 set the conditions for future instability. These external statebuilders prioritised restoring a failed political system and rebuilding the coercive structures of the state which had perpetuated it. For Guichaoua, the French intervention in Mali has been both security driven and bureaucratised, with the development signifiers of state presence such as schools and clinics viewed as a technical means to the end of security (Guichaoua 2020). This security is defined as: ‘weakening GATs (armed terrorist groups) sufficiently that local armies are able to fight them “on their own”’ (Guichaoua 2020, 907, footnote 58). This suggests that the desired end state towards which the French military are working in Mali is, at its most fundamental, the construction of a central state capable of militarily disrupting rebel organisation in the periphery. However, the technical military capacity of the state in the abstract is arguably less important for the postcolonial state than its success at building internal legitimacy.

The sequencing and relative balance of military strengthening to legitimacy-building activity during international statebuilding is a debated balancing act (see Sedra 2018; Gippert 2017; Donais 2018). Yet it is clear that military strength alone is not a firm basis for a modern territorial state as coercion is an expensive way to compel compliance in the long term. Strong states are ultimately reliant on legitimacy and acceptance by the governed. For Crawford Young:

[State] Hegemony is rendered credible by the visible possession of superior force. However, coercion may well be conceived of metaphorically as a gold reserve underpinning the currency of power. If constantly employed, the reserves are emptied in short order, and rapid devaluation of power itself soon follows. Through investing its institutions with legitimate authority, the state seeks habitual acquiescence in and consent to its rule. (Crawford Young 1997, 37)

Since 2013 Mali has experienced particularly shallow statebuilding, which has ultimately prioritised the creation and maintenance of visibly superior military force over the investiture of legitimate authority in, admittedly imperfect, institutions. French military forces have been metaphorically topping up the reserve of military coercion in Mali and both enabled and promoted its continual use in a manner which undercuts local political accountability. The restoration of failed Bamako elites in 2013 was itself a failure to make space for a more legitimate state authority to emerge and condemned Mali to a cycle of violent contestation for power and dependence on foreign military support.

### Mali's state coercive capacity

Notwithstanding its supposed weakness, the central state in Mali has historically maintained visibly superior coercive force, certainly between 1962 and 1990. That it did not maintain this force between 1991 and 2012 has been suggested to be a consequence of low state capacity (Castelli 2014), whereas new data appears to suggest this was a positive choice by Mali's democratic leaders. A technical lack of capacity requires only a technocratic strengthening of the military to be resolved. The political imperatives which disincentivised military strengthening require contextually specific, historically rooted, political solutions. Whilst the Malian army unquestionably collapsed in 2012, leading to the near failure of the state itself, the broad equation of military strength with the vitality of the state would be ahistorical and takes no account of the pressing contextual reasons that a democratic government in Mali might wish to avoid recreating the conditions which led to military rule between 1968 and 1991. Historically, the Malian state has invested disproportionately in its military strength, with around 21 per cent of government revenue going to the military (see Table 1). This relatively colossal expenditure on defence has implications for legitimacy as every franc spent on the army is one that is not being spent on education, health, or infrastructure. This trade-off was recognised by Mali's first democratically elected president, Alpha Konaré (1992–2002) (Baba Coulibaly 2004). Indeed, under Konaré and his successor, President Amadou Toumani Touré (2002–12, known as ATT), there was a noticeable dip in Mali's military expenditure, although it still remained significantly higher than the global average.

It may appear reasonable for a state undergoing violent conflict to spend a higher proportion of its revenue on security and defence. However, Mali's spending is

**Table 1.** Defence as a proportion of total government expenditure using data from the IISS Military Balance, IMF, World Bank, and the French Diplomatic Archive.

	Global average	Socialist Mali (1960–68)	Military Mali (1968–91)	Democratic Mali (1992–2012)	Post-2013
Military expenditure (percentage of state budget)	6.4	21	22	10	21

proportionately far higher than other conflict-affected countries. For example, Colombia, a state of equivalent size and difficulty of terrain, which also faces a persistent insurgency, spends roughly 10 per cent of government revenue on security and defence.<sup>1</sup> This high level of spending has also been maintained over long periods during which Mali was not undergoing active insurrection, for example the 1960s saw the state challenged only during 1962–64 but defence spending appears to display a ratchet effect; once increased by this period of conflict it did not appreciably dip until the democratic era.

In the Malian case, greater military spending as a percentage of government revenue does not correlate with the overall strength or stability of the state; indeed, this relationship appears to be inverted. This complicates the French understanding of Malian state weakness in military terms, and calls into question the underlying logic of the programme of statebuilding which resulted from this understanding. Mali has suffered six successful coups since 1960, and a narrowly unsuccessful attempt in 1978. It has engaged in armed conflict against external enemies only twice, both times against Burkina Faso (1974–75 and 1985). This is a poor record given that the primary responsibility of the military, as opposed to the police or gendarmerie, is defence against external threats. Across the history of the Republic by far the greatest threat to the state has been the military itself, which has proven more than twice as likely to strike at its own government than external enemies. Perhaps the most critical explanation for the persistent influence of the military in Malian politics is the development of an unbalanced military–fiscal compact which has maintained a far greater military capacity than domestically generated surpluses can support. So why did Mali, an impoverished country which lacks obvious external enemies in its region, develop this strong military capacity in the first place?

### State–military relations in Mali

Initially the first post-independence government of Mali recognised that the development of a strong military was unrealistic given the material limitations of Mali’s resource base. The Republic of Mali inherited less than half an army at the point of independence in 1960 and was by design militarily dependent on the continued presence of French troops to secure its vast Saharan frontier. It is clear from the minutes of the negotiations between France and the Malian Federal Government in Dakar<sup>2</sup> that an army of approximately two divisions (one Senegalese and one Soudanese, each numbering some 2500 men) was planned, to be supplemented with troops from the French Community (FM0016 1960; FM0022 1950). The Malian government specifically requested on at least two occasions that a French nomad battalion remain at Gao in order to secure this vulnerable area from the Tuareg (FM0022 1960a).

This plan was rendered meaningless after the acrimonious breakup of the Mali Federation and the complete ejection of French troops from the new Republic of Mali (the former Federation minus Senegal) which resulted in 1961. Even prior to the breakup of the Federation the Malian army had been significantly under its paper strength, with just over 2,000 personnel including reserves available in 1960. Of these, 456 were working parties of questionable combat value and another 700 were transport, engineers, or headquarters staff (FM0022 1960b). This meant that the combat elements of the new Malian army were at less than quarter strength. The bases at Kayes and Segou both had reconnaissance companies of 150 men instead of the planned-for battalions of 856 and

the situation in Gao, Sikasso, and Niore was little better. To return to Crawford Young's analogy of military power as the gold reserves that underpin state hegemony, these reserves had been dramatically reduced just as the credibility of state hegemony was tested by an embryonic rebellion in the north.

### The first Tuareg rebellion, 1962–64

The military pressure on the credibility of the newly independent Malian state quickly reached crisis levels. The Belgian ambassador reported that, as the Malian government had feared, tensions immediately began to rise between Bamako and the Tuareg 'from the start of 1961, as soon as the last French garrisons evacuated their Saharan bases in Mali' (14-569 1964). Desperate for foreign exchange to expand the capacity of the state and to allow for imports, the government of President Modibo Keita unwisely attempted to levy taxes on the Tuareg in northern Mali, tripling the cattle head tax overnight (DAM339QONT-33 1962). Attempts to collect this tax led to widespread trafficking and attempts to prevent this trafficking led to open rebellion in the Kidal region. A Belgian report on the ensuing Tuareg rebellion was scathing about the handling of an already tense situation by the Keita administration and describes how:

missteps were committed by the Malian authorities which resulted in open rebellion by the Tuareg:

1. attempts at political organisation of the nomadic population
2. collecting taxes
3. inventory of cattle
4. slaughter of cattle
5. control of commercial exchange. (14-569 1964)

This interference by the state is further described as a clash between 'the feudal system of the Tuareg population and the socialist regime of Modibo Keita' (14-569 1964). The Tuareg resisted imposition of outside authority and this resistance necessitated the deployment of troops from the Malian army to enable administrators to operate.

The pyrrhic victory of state forces over this rebellion placed Mali on the path towards military rule in 1968 and illustrates the strategic folly of military-led statebuilding. The attempt by the cash-strapped Malian state to secure greater revenue by extending taxation and economic control to the north through military occupation had the paradoxical effect of increasing the costs of the state. Far from pacifying the region, this aggressive approach led to a significant increase in violence which required Mali to divert more and more of the scarce resources of the state to the military. The army emerged from the rebellion greatly strengthened both in numbers and equipment and as a more powerful force in Malian politics. By 1964 the Malian army maintained a deployed presence of between 2,000 and 4,500 personnel in the north (Associated Press and 14-569 1964; Mariko and Boilley 2001; 14-569 1964).<sup>3</sup> In terms of heavy equipment French ambassador Pelen reported they had also received significant quantities of Eastern Bloc heavy equipment, at least 150 BTR-152s and 250 Soviet trucks of various types by 1965, in addition to a small number of T34-85 tanks (DAM339QONT-38 1965b; SIPRI 2019).

This technical success in strengthening the army was also a catastrophic political failure. Military investment represented a significant drain of scarce resources away from other state projects and, more dangerously, led the army to become, in the words of Pelen:



Pampered ... until now the Army has wanted for nothing. It benefits from numerous material privileges which unquestionably create an inequality between the situation of the soldier and the civilian, the first find themselves notably advantaged with respect to the second. (DAM339QONT-38 1965b)

The brutal conduct of the counterinsurgency campaign (Mariko and Pierre 2001) also led to festering grievances between impoverished and mistreated northern civilians and the relatively ‘pampered’ southern soldiers. To defeat the rebellion, the military employed methods which destroyed the tax base of northern Mali, rendering the entire exercise ultimately counterproductive. Not only did they destroy the taxable property of the north and drive the most affluent into exile but they also used their new vehicles with impunity to replace the Tuareg as traffickers, a position they held into the 1970s and beyond (DAM339QONT-61 1977b). Their newfound strength made the socialist President Modibo Keita hesitant to hold the army to account over this trafficking (DAM339QONT-38 1965a).

### Mali under military rule 1968–91

The military regime of Moussa Traoré continued to strengthen the Malian armed forces, which grew still larger and more heavily equipped. Over the course of the 1970s the army grew to between three and four times the regional average manpower, with the Chinese defence attaché estimating it at a strength of 12,000 men (DAM339QONT-62 1977).<sup>4</sup> Compared with its neighbours, this made Mali a relative superpower, equipped with armour and air forces, and capable of combined arms operations. The Malian regime used these forces to crushing effect against Burkina Faso during the frontier conflicts of 1974–75 (DAM339QONT-58 1975) and 1985 (CIA 1986; 2210INVA-542 no date).

However, for a state of Mali’s limited resources, such a capable military was an unaffordable extravagance, still taking up more than 22 per cent of the state budget in 1984 after years of attempts to bring defence spending under control as part of the 1981–85 austerity programme (2210INVA-541 1984b). This had been imposed partly by the fiscal trade-offs required to support a military capacity above Mali’s ability to pay for it, which required resources to be found from abroad. By the mid-1970s Mali was running chronic deficits of, coincidentally, around 20 per cent of government expenditure. In 1976 this deficit reached 9.1 billion Malian francs out of a total budget of 49.2 billion (DAM339QONT-61 1977b), and passed 10 billion Malian francs in both 1977 and 1978 (DAM339QONT-61 1978b). Military dictator Moussa Traoré himself recognised Mali’s broken fiscal–military compact and used his Army Day speech in February of 1984 to argue that there was a need to reduce still further ‘military expenditure which weighs excessively on the development of the country’ (2210INVA-541 1984a). These plans were unsuccessful as Traoré had inherited his predecessor’s dilemma of what to do with a relatively large professional army that was unaffordable but also armed and therefore un-sackable. Traoré was forced to balance the need for military support to maintain the exploitative structures of the state against internal threats whilst also keeping it weak enough that it was both affordable and unable to overthrow the head of state. This appears to be the common governance problem across Mali’s post-independence history. The post-2013 French focus on strengthening the Malian military, which resulted in the 2020 coup d’état, suggests a lack of consideration for this difficult balancing act.



## The army during the lean years

Following the end of the cold war, virtual defeat by Tuareg rebels, and the 1991 coup d'état the Malian army was significantly weakened. Throughout the cold war Mali had benefited from access to military hardware and training as well as fiscal support from various states. When these resources dried up in the early 1990s the structural unsustainability of the Malian military became immediately apparent and the military regime of Moussa Traoré collapsed (AP 1991). When these resources were again made available, during the era of the War on Terror, the Malian government was extremely wary of falling into the same trap. Traoré's democratic successors scrupulously avoided redeveloping a strong military capacity and the Malian state under both Presidents Konaré and ATT avoided conflict and sought to negotiate with rebel groups. As interim president, ATT had been forced to sign the humiliating peace of Tamanrasset in 1991, in which the Malian state agreed to an effective withdrawal from the north:

Article 4: The Malian Armed Forces shall not carry out any activities likely to result in clashes with the combatants. They shall gradually reduce their presence in the 6th and 7th Regions. ...

Article 7: The Malian Armed Forces will restrict themselves to their role of defending territorial integrity at the frontiers. (PA-X 1991)

This agreement was followed by the 1992 National Pact, which set the pattern for the next two decades of messy decentralisation, with new levels of administration created in order to buy off potential rebels rather than challenge them militarily.

The reluctance of Mali's democratic leaders to strengthen the military cannot be explained by lack of resources. Following the 9/11 attacks the ATT administration successfully lobbied the United States to provide large quantities of arms and equipment, allegedly for the purposes of enabling the Malian state to take back control of the potential terrorist safe havens in the north (US Department of State 2007). However, these resources were not utilised. In 2006, in response to a deteriorating situation in the north and a small rebellion, ATT signed another humiliating agreement in Algiers which was premised on further troop withdrawals from the north, particularly barracks in urban areas, and gave security functions to local irregular units (PA-X 2006). Despite several years of United States military support, ATT's priority appeared to be avoiding an armed conflict between the state and the rebels at all costs. This caution did not reflect the scale of US support. According to US State Department cables, within 12 months of securing United States military backing in 2002 Mali had received over \$4 million in equipment, training, and cash with the promise that: 'several million dollars of additional aid, residual ACRI funds, may also be available in the near future' (C18633622 2003).

These resources were not used to rebuild the Malian army to the levels seen during 1962–91. In contrast, under ATT Malian military spending plummeted to its lowest level (as a percentage of government income) since the early 1960s, roughly half of the historical average at 10 per cent in 2010 (International Monetary Fund 2019).

Without historical context, and with knowledge only of Mali's democratic era, the European focus on military strengthening is understandable. Looking at the decisions of the ATT government in isolation, it is easy to see the decision to starve the army of resources as a, potentially corrupt, mistake. When challenged by the 2012 rebellion, the army, and

government, folded quickly, which led directly to French military intervention. After a decade of resources and training from the United States the Malian army was unable to resist the rebel advance, suffering defeat after defeat. According to the contemporaneous account of an American diplomat: ‘The French believe the Malian army in and around Mopti is in total disarray. Soldiers in the garrison in Mopti have been taking off their uniforms, abandoning their weapons, and seeking transport to go south toward Bamako’ (Carson 2013).

The apparent French understanding that the collapse of the Malian state was above all a military failure informed the approach taken when attempting to reconstruct the state post-2013 (Guilloteau and Nauche 2013, 15). If, as the French analysis appears to be, the military weakness of the state allowed an external enemy to invade and occupy territory, then the priority strengthening of the military makes logical sense. However, a longer view of the relationship between the army and the state in Mali point to different conclusions. The collapse of the Malian state ultimately resulted from unexpected pressure during the slow structural transition away from a long-term reliance on military coercion towards local legitimacy. After 2013, French and European allies, with their technocratic focus on security, engaged in a military strengthening effort in Mali which reset the balance of power in the political relationship between the state and the army, recreating the conditions for a military takeover.

### The conditions for military dictatorship

The military capture of the Malian state in 1968 was facilitated by the interaction of domestic and international conditions with historical contingency. Domestically, the socialist government was unpopular, and the military was relatively powerful, although declining in influence. The international environment was fairly benign for military coup governments, which were perceived as a non-ideological stabilising force against the ‘extremist’ alternatives that would seek to export socialism across the region.

After eight years of increasingly authoritarian rule and declining living standards the Malian people were unhappy with the government. French ambassador Dallier pulled no punches in his analysis of Mali’s fallen socialist regime and highlighted the generalised unpopularity of the president himself:

Necessity is today with the sceptics and to those nostalgic for ‘scientific socialism’, none are to be found among the five million inhabitants of Mali, there is not a single one to show loyalty to the ex-President Modibo Keita and mark with regret his eviction ... the eight years of socialist experience have had as their only consequence the shortage of basic goods, low salaries, too high prices, in short all the miseries that are suffered by the most underprivileged classes. The intellectuals will not soon forget the arrogance and the brutality of the militia, ‘those illiterates’. The businesspeople will have long memories of the measures taken to exclude them little by little from the economic life of the country. (DAM339QONT-19 1969)

This sentiment was generally shared by the Bamako diplomatic corps, who could not help but be struck by the rapidity with which the socialist state collapsed, and the totality with which its institutions were swept aside. Despite a 1990s attempt to rehabilitate the image of Mali’s socialist era, the military junta which replaced it were able to harness for some years the goodwill of the population (DAM339QONT-61 1978a). Indeed, as late as

1989 Moussa Traoré's official state biography spoke of this as one of the two occasions upon which he had been called to return 'liberty' to the people of Mali (18-920/95 1989).

By 1968 the military was a powerful and well-resourced political force (DAM339QONT-38 1965b) but was increasingly threatened by the formation of a People's Militia, intended as a loyal regime counterweight, which outnumbered the army and gendarmerie combined and was better equipped (DAM339QONT-18 1968b). The actual coup d'état of 1968 demonstrated, however, that the militia, while capable political thugs, were not up to the challenge of balancing the army, which swept aside their limited resistance in a matter of hours (DAM339QONT-18 1968a). French ambassador Dallier described how: 'The police state built following the Chinese model, has collapsed like a house of cards' (DAM339QONT-19 1969).

Mali also faced a relatively benign international environment for coups d'état. The British ambassador was already commenting in 1964 on 'the wave of coups d'état in this part of the world' (FO371-176970 1964). It was widely known in 1968 that none of these had provoked a negative international response. Indeed, the coup was welcomed by France, which saw in Mali's new management a non-ideological bulwark against 'extremism' in the region, defined not by jihadism but by socialism. French diplomats consistently understood the military government as uninterested in foreign policy, patriotic, and pragmatic: 'The soldiers who compose the [ruling] committee are simple men, little concerned with doctrine and ardent nationalists. Their diplomacy is in their image' (DAM339QONT-61 1977a). This understanding of soldiers as somehow apolitical reassured the Quai d'Orsay that French interests were better secured with a military regime, which they believed valued maintaining a special relationship with France (DAM339QONT-61 1977a).

This special relationship only intensified throughout the period of military rule, and if France had wished to exert influence in favour of democratisation this would have been within the power of the *Élysée*. Through the extremely powerful monetary leverage France maintained following the 1967 Financial Agreement: 'France plays an essential role in the maintenance of equilibrium in Malian finances' (DAM339QONT-61 1977c). Simply, without continued French support Mali would not have been able to maintain substantial deficit spending and would have faced an instant currency crisis on top of an economic status quo which was, according to Belgian ambassador Count Liederkerke 'catastrophic' (17-872 1981).

French officials were aware of the detrimental preponderance of the army in Malian political life throughout the 1970s, arguing that 'the place in the nation of the army, which is today omnipotent, must be defined' (DAM339QONT-61 1977b). However, French policymakers chose not to exert the influence they wielded over Mali's economic stability to promote a democratic transition. For Paris, military rule was an acceptable price for stability, particularly as the Traoré regime was considered an ally to French interests in the wider region: 'The leadership team is for us – overall – very favourable and if it were to be replaced ... it would without doubt be to our detriment' (DAM339QONT-65 1976; 2210INVA-542 no date, 22).

This pursuit of stability in Mali is a common theme across the period of Mali's post-independence relationship with France, and the post-2013 period is no exception. By prioritising the security of the status quo, French and European intervention has

recreated, little by little, the conditions which allowed for a successful military capture of the Malian state between 1968 and 1991. An emphasis on military strengthening has led to a return to 1980s levels of military spending by the Malian state. The army is now larger, better trained, and better equipped than it has been for decades. The increased resources that flow to the army as a result of external assistance were not determined by Malian political leaders. This was a key achievement of the European Union and a major battle with political authorities in Bamako which was intended to prevent corrupt diversion of army salaries (Tull 2019). However, the bureaucratisation of payment of salaries also demolished a requirement for democratic control of the armed forces by removing the budgetary lever from the control of political authorities. With European insistence on bureaucratising the flow of resources to the military, ATT's political strategy of diverting resources was increasingly unavailable to his successor.

The pressures of balancing the demands of external partners with the political demands of citizens fundamentally weakened the Malian state by undermining lines of accountability and legitimacy. This led to a vicious cycle of state weakness where the state became more dependent on its foreign allies and coercive force to survive, which further undermined its legitimacy, requiring greater input from foreign allies and the military to shore it up, which led to still more demands on the enfeebled state. This cycle is particularly clear in the runup to the conference in Pau, France, in January 2019. Large demonstrations and protests in Bamako, which had a substantial anti-French element, led to a sharp summons by French President Emmanuel Macron, who called regional leaders to Pau to secure a show of public gratitude for the French presence (Le Monde 2020). These protests placed great stress on the Franco-Malian relationship which had visibly frayed over the course of 2019–20, culminating in the French president's public comments in January 2020 that he was reluctant to send additional troops to a place they were not 'clearly wanted'. Macron complained: 'I see opposition movements, groups, who denounce the French presence as a neo-colonial, imperialist' (France 24 2020).

At the same time as these demonstrators were articulating the political demand that French forces should leave, a deteriorating security situation imposed the technical requirement for more French troops to avert defeat on a regional scale. An attack in December 2019 killed 71 Nigerien soldiers and a further 89 were killed in a second such attack a week prior to the Pau summit in January 2020 (Adebayo 2020; Armstrong 2019; France 24 2020). The French government appeared to be caught in a lose–lose situation. For a reluctant Macron, faced with a deteriorating situation and no new strategic ideas, the choice to send more troops appeared rather predetermined: 'We have no choice. Now we must have results' (Macron in Mallet, Munshi, and Peel 2020).

The 2020 Pau conference met the short-term French objective of securing a public commitment from Mali's president that France was truly welcome (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2020, 5). However, the additional French commitment of troops did not save the Malian government from collapse within eight months of the summit. The government had been forced to pick a side, and chose to align, however hesitantly, with its international backers. Pau re-established the internal conditions which had enabled the successful 1968 coup d'état with the Malian government increasingly dependent on its military strength and external backers to survive against popular

dissatisfaction and a deteriorating domestic situation. The unhappy faction within the military now had the means and a domestic political situation which permitted them to seize power.

The final element which recreated the conditions for a successful military coup d'état, and which was notably absent despite the presence of the first two conditions in both 1991 and 2012, was a permissive international environment. As has already been illustrated the French government was exhausted with Mali and is increasingly seeking a way to reduce its commitment while not undermining its counterterrorism objectives (Associated Press 2021; Irish 2021; Al Jazeera 2020). The wider international community was also distracted by the ongoing health emergency and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on its own had few credible options to intervene and remove Mali's coup leaders by force. This meant that the negotiations between ECOWAS and the junta were by practical necessity limited in what they could hope to achieve: finding an acceptable fig-leaf to disguise the new status quo. The 2017 toppling of Mugabe provided a recent illustration that the international community would likely not push back hard on a military coup as long as it could be framed as something else (Beardsworth, Cheeseman, and Tinhu 2019).

Having clearly taken this lesson, the Malian military junta was at pains to stress the transitional nature of this drastic step. Whilst France initially stressed the importance of democracy in Mali, this was not motivated by abstract principle. Defence minister Florence Parly's justification for the French demand for a return to constitutionalism showed the fundamentally military calculus which informed this position: 'If this does not happen, the risk is that all this benefits terrorists first and foremost. Terrorists feed on the weakness of states' (Europe 1 2020). The airstrike carried out by French forces at Bounti in January 2021, and its aftermath, appear to indicate that French military actions still prioritise striking at rebel groups in the periphery over democratic principles. Following a dreadful week for Barkhane in which it took over 10 per cent of its total combat casualties in Mali, French forces carried out an airstrike which led to significant casualties (ABC News 2021). Initial statements from Barkhane announced this as a successful strike on a jihadist group but this narrative was quickly questioned, with increasing evidence that the target hit was in fact a wedding (Human Rights Watch 2021). This was subsequently confirmed by a UN investigation (MINUSMA 2021). French attempts to substantiate their claim that this was not a wedding but a legitimate target led to the exposure of the flimsiness of the proof required for aerial strikes to be carried out. It also contributed to an emerging pattern of French high-casualty airstrikes, of unclear legality under international humanitarian law, which follow military setbacks. In February 2020, following the uncertainty and violence which led up to the Pau summit, French forces claimed to have killed 30 terrorists in airstrikes in the tri-border area:

Barkhane mobilised its aerial assets at very short notice, demonstrating the capacity of the force to act quickly and length of its reach. A Reaper drone, a patrol of Mirage 2000, as well as a Tiger and a Cougar helicopter participated in two targeted strikes on an area where terrorist fighters had been spotted. (État-major des armées 2020)

This reliance on airpower to hold rebellious populations in fear and awe is familiar from Dodge's concept of government by aircraft and results from the attempt to impose control over large areas at low cost, in both blood and treasure, through technological

means. In British colonial Iraq (1921–32) the administration bombed rebellious or recalcitrant villages which either violently resisted or merely refused to pay taxes (Dodge 2006). A century later in Mali, the criteria by which French forces determine which populations to punish from the air are less clearly defined. A French military spokesman told the AP that, in the case of the 2021 Bounti airstrike, the French military was able to conclude it was a ‘terrorist armed group’ based on individuals’ attitudes, their equipment, and other intelligence information (ABC News 2021). How it is possible to determine a group’s attitude by drone was not explained. The category of ‘other intelligence information’ included the presence of motorcycles, walkie-talkies, and at least one pair of binoculars (ABC News 2021; The Guardian 2021; Human Rights Watch 2021; Le Pays 2021; Le Républicain 2021). Confidence in the legitimacy of French targeting decisions was further undermined by a clumsy statement from the French army’s chief of staff, who highlighted that they ‘needed some wins’ before the February 2021 G5 summit (Nasr 2021). This is not an isolated incident but forms a pattern flowing all the way back to an understanding of state weakness as a lack of military strength, which does not consider the political accountability required to exercise legitimate force. A state which is technically capable of cowing opposition but does not care much for accountability is not dissimilar from the weak, coercive colonial states of the past.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the limitations of the concept of state weakness, defined in military terms, for understanding the security and governance challenges of the Republic of Mali. Not only was the Malian state relatively strong in military terms throughout much of its history but the costs of maintaining this strength actually proved detrimental to building political legitimacy by diverting scarce resources to the military. The new archival evidence presented further substantiates existing critiques of the weak states framework in this context, while extending the scope of this critique to demonstrate not just that this framework is an inappropriate lens to understand contemporary challenges, but that it is historically misconceived. This article has provided a brief history of the relationship between the state and the military as a corrective to this understanding of state weakness and builds on this detailed account to highlight the conditions which permitted successful state capture by the military in both 1968 and 2020.

This article has argued that external intervention, through an inadequate appreciation of the historically fraught relationship between state and military in Mali, inadvertently set the conditions for a return to military rule. A post-2013 French approach to external statebuilding which located the roots of Mali’s security problems in state weakness, defined as a lack of coercive capacity, incentivised policy choices that made democratic governance more difficult. This attempt at statebuilding restored to the military the share of national resources they had enjoyed during the era of military rule (1968–91). It also placed the civilian government in an invidious position, forcing them to choose publicly between aligning with external statebuilder interests or with growing public dissatisfaction. This restored the internal conditions which had precipitated Mali’s previous era of military rule: a relatively strong military and an unpopular government. The final element, a comparatively permissive international environment, was set by French dissatisfaction with the civilian Malian government and its perceived corruption and

ineptitude. The message of French frustration was clearly communicated and the initial slow response to the 2020 coup d'état confirmed a general reluctance to exert too much effort to restore a political system which had been widely perceived as failing. The Malian case demonstrates the importance of the historical turn in international relations scholarship through an object lesson in how ahistorical frameworks, such as state weakness, can undermine statebuilding efforts and lead to unintended adverse outcomes. The potential for greater engagement with historical knowledge, and historical methods of knowledge production such as archives, to add value to existing scholarly approaches is clear.

## Notes

1. World Bank data on defence expenditure as a percentage of government revenue for the year 2019. This does not include private spending on 'security provision' broadly defined, which represents a significantly greater share of GDP than state spending, although estimates vary.
2. During the short-lived Federation of Mali, which included Senegal.
3. Amadou Mariko, who commanded a unit near Tessalit, estimated 1,500–2,000 out of a total armed forces strength of 4,000 but there is a significant range in terms of estimates. The 4,500 number in the Belgian report likely includes gendarmerie and irregular forces.
4. The Chinese defence attaché was no doubt well informed as China was Mali's second most important military backer at this time.
5. The archetype of this weak but militarised colonial state in Africa is the Bula Matari, described by Crawford Young (1997).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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