
FRENCH EXPERIENCE AND PERSPECTIVES

Although France has been especially active in West and Central Africa, its engagement is global. In terms of humanitarian airlift alone, France has engaged in some 70 relief operations in the period 1968–1998—roughly half in Africa, and the rest in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. French humanitarian airlift activity in Africa is first in rank among European allies; it is supported by permanent bases at Djibouti, N’Djamena, Libreville, Dakar, and Abidjan. In addition, Paris has defense arrangements with 23 African states.

HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION AS A CORE MISSION

There are multiple reasons for French activism in relief operations beyond post-colonial links. Paris views humanitarian involvement in Africa as part of a larger vision of French leadership in francophone Africa. Humanitarian action is seen as part of the French foreign policy tradition, and expeditionary operations are very much part of French military tradition. Recent French governments, especially in the Mitterrand years, have also made an effort to transform the traditional pattern of French relations in Africa into a more multilateral strategy (e.g., working with the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and others to develop local capabilities for crisis management) emphasizing Third World-oriented development issues.¹ France has been among the strongest advocates of a *droit d’ingerence*—the “right to interfere” in humanitarian crises, and has combined vigorous humanitarian diplomacy in the UN and elsewhere with an as-

¹Tiersky (1995), p. 51.

sertive approach to peacekeeping and peace support operations worldwide.² On a regional basis (e.g., in Africa), and in terms of its willingness to commit forces to complex, expeditionary operations, it is a “peer plus.”³

French security strategy emphasizes humanitarian missions, alongside requirements for territorial defense, managing regional conflicts, maintaining defense agreements, and addressing a major threat in Europe. Humanitarian intervention is thus a core mission for French planners.⁴ Moreover, French policymakers have generally been more willing than their American counterparts in recent years to use force in a limited, expeditionary manner and for crisis management—even where it has been difficult to articulate precise objectives.⁵ The risk of “mission creep” and the necessity for “exit strategies” have been less evident in French debates on humanitarian intervention. French strategic culture imposes fewer constraints on the use of military forces for humanitarian purposes and places fewer obstacles to the withdrawal of these forces in circumstances short of “success” (often an intangible definition in relief operations). In short, the French political and operational calculus is more tolerant of murkiness in such operations.

French bases in and around Africa can greatly facilitate relief operations where the French military is involved (these facilities are not ordinarily available for French or other NGOs). The French airlift command (Commandement de la Force Aérienne de Projection—FAP) maintains permanent, prepositioned forces at four bases in the western hemisphere—three in Africa (Dakar, Faso, and Djibouti) and at New Caledonia in the Pacific. In addition, there are now forces temporarily deployed in Chad, Abidjan, Gabon, N’Djamena, and, of course, the Balkans. The number and geographical distribution of French humanitarian airlift missions over the last 20 years is impressive.

²Guillot (1994), pp. 30–43.

³In recent years, French forces have engaged in “complex” interventions in the Central African Republic, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, Rwanda, Zaire, and Somalia, along with many lesser deployments elsewhere.

⁴Lanxade (1994).

⁵For a good survey of changes in French defense strategy through the mid-1990s, see Laird (1995).

The mission emphases and operational challenges facing French airlift forces have evolved considerably since 1945, when the focus was on the evacuation of wounded personnel and the repatriation of prisoners and refugees. The environment at that time was unthreatening and did not call for specialized aircraft. In the 1960s, the focus shifted to disaster relief and food delivery, at longer range and sometimes to austere facilities, but again, with little threat. In the 1980s to the present, humanitarian airlift became engaged in a number of new and more complex missions—in insecure conditions.

NEW SECURITY RISKS

French planners emphasize that relief operations, especially in Africa (the same can be said of the Balkans) have become increasingly dangerous, to the extent that few missions are simply “humanitarian” in the strict sense. As a result, there are now greater demands on intelligence and self-protection (“force protection”). Airlift operations now often require the presence of armored vehicles at local airfields. With the growth of more serious SAM and air-to-air threats in relief operations, France has equipped its tactical airlifters with radar warning equipment and flares. Force protection requirements often dictate rapid loading and unloading of humanitarian cargo, placing a premium on short-takeoff, tactical aircraft (e.g., Transall). Tactical lift and short loiter times are also useful for non-combatant evacuations—an important mission for French airlifters. Heavy lift, largely the province of commercial vendors for Europeans, is judged to be less useful for relief operations of the sort France has been engaged in over the past decade. Its utility, in the French view, is largely confined to transit between main operating bases in Europe and Africa.

NGO-MILITARY RELATIONS

French NGOs and the military have a wary relationship, as is generally the case elsewhere. French embassies in host countries are the normal clearinghouse for liaison between NGOs and the French military. French NGOs are jealous of their independence, not only vis-à-vis the military but also in their relations with the French government. Ironically, this relationship was not improved by the elevation of humanitarian issues in French policy in recent years. Jealous of

their autonomy and independence from the government, NGOs were particularly suspicious of repeated attempts to establish a Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs. The ministry had four separate incarnations and at one point was led by a founder of Médecins Sans Frontières.

Nonetheless, French NGOs have considerable respect for the professionalism and capabilities of the French military. NGOs and the military worked together in Ethiopia in 1985 and in Somalia, making good use of the French base in Djibouti. During Operation Turquoise in Rwanda in 1994, French NGOs worked alongside the French military for six months. Despite some suspicion, there was also a realization of considerable complementarity, especially in the medical area. This experience was repeated in French relief efforts in Honduras and Guatemala in the wake of Hurricane Mitch. While acknowledging the skills accumulated by the French in tropical medicine—another legacy of the colonial experience—the generation of military doctors with this experience is almost past. It is worth noting that the French military's assessment of the working relationship with NGOs is, in general, more negative than the assessment given by NGO officials.⁶ The Programme Alimentaire Mondial (PAM) is cited by FAP as a positive exception in terms of capability and coordination with the military. Beyond the need for better coordination with NGOs, French airlifters note the more fundamental need for improved coordination *between* NGOs, and among NGOs, the Foreign Ministry, and the Ministry of Defense.

COOPERATION WITH OTHER EUROPEAN ALLIES

Germany, the UK, and, to a lesser extent, Belgium are the key European partners for France in humanitarian airlift. These working relationships are viewed as very good. Germany and France worked closely in Ethiopia in 1986 and have joint discussions (although no exercises) on their operations in Sudan. In some cases, operations have been multinational in a broader sense, as with Operation Pelican in Congo, where of the 6000 people evacuated by French aircraft only 2000 were French. There is an expectation that the interoperability with European allies will grow in light of such operations.

⁶An American observer with experience in Africa noted that the French military appeared “much tougher” in dealing with NGOs—including their own.

Interoperability will need to exist at the juridical level as well. As an example, there have been significant liability issues associated with Medivac cooperation with European partners. In coalition relief operations, the French military prefers to see a lead nation (e.g., France in Macedonia) responsible for the coordination of civil and military airlift. Traffic management is cited as having been a particular problem in Rwanda, where chartered aircraft often arrived without notice.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE U.S. ROLE IN COMPLEX RELIEF OPERATIONS

French military officials and French NGOs offer similar observations about U.S. military participation in humanitarian relief. The United States does things professionally, on a large scale, but is seen as “somewhat remote and disengaged.” By contrast, French and other European militaries see themselves as knowing the countries and the cultures well, but necessarily doing things on a smaller scale.⁷ The USAF is viewed as particularly effective at main operating bases and as having superb command, control, and communications (C3). French and American approaches to humanitarian intelligence also differ. The French and other Europeans tend to concentrate on local conditions—the situation on the ground. The United States in contrast, is in a better position to offer a regional overview (a well-known human intelligence versus technical means argument applied to the humanitarian environment). These differences offer the potential for considerable synergy; the French acknowledge that despite their considerable knowledge of the countries, military planners faced difficult intelligence problems in the Great Lakes crisis and had divergent indicators at critical points.

The French-U.S. working relationship at the operational level is described as very good. The Balkans offer a much more substantial test in this regard; in some previous cases, notably Somalia, airlifters from the two countries were engaged but operated from separate bases. The 1998 RECAMP exercise in Senegal brought together French, British, and U.S. personnel in a multilateral training activity

⁷For example, many of the Europeans involved in Somalia relief operations had already spent two years in Africa.

with African militaries. The emphasis was on peacekeeping, but the exercise was also relevant to humanitarian contingencies. France furnished aircraft and logistic support, while the U.S. contingent operated offshore.⁸

STANDARDIZATION IN HUMANITARIAN LIFT AND AIRDROP

The French airlift command sees considerable potential for improved standardization in airlift practices for humanitarian contingencies. The need for standardization is especially evident in airdrop, where allies have different practices. At the most basic level, pallets for airdrop may differ. Procedures for low-level airdrop, in particular, can also differ substantially. There is a need for uniform standards and, above all, exercises among allies to develop unified concepts for humanitarian airdrop (France has participated in some recent exercises of this sort with German and Polish forces). High-altitude airdrop (5000–15,000 feet), as practiced by U.S., French, and German forces in high-threat environments such as Bosnia, similarly requires special equipment and techniques. The FAP is developing new systems for this kind of high-altitude operation.

The range of techniques to suit varying humanitarian needs, threat environments, and even political objectives on the ground can be wide. In Sudan, French and German aircraft have been making low-altitude drops without pallets. During famine relief operations in the Sahel in the 1970s, France made airdrops at 60 feet without pallets—perhaps 50 percent of supplies dropped in this manner arrived intact.⁹ The implications of these approaches for local politics and security conditions can be significant. For example, palletized drops tend to reinforce the local control of regimes, warlords, and armed factions, especially in poor weather or rugged terrain. Smaller, unpalletized packages can be more easily recovered by individuals.

⁸The British used their base at Ascension Island to support this exercise.

⁹German airlifters have made a specialty of dropping wooden pallets at low altitude without parachutes; French airdrops of this sort are almost always made with parachutes.

LESSONS FROM OPERATION PELICAN

The French evacuation and relief mission to Zaire and the Congo was conducted in three phases (Operations Pelican 1–3) between March and June 1997 and involved the movement of roughly 6000 people. Some 1500 were evacuated by civilian aircraft, and the remainder by military airlift. French planners have distilled several lessons from this experience. First, the operation confirmed the importance of tactical lift for the kinds of missions France is likely to face in the future. Second, the operation reinforced the perception that such missions are increasingly “complex,” with political and security implications that transcend the traditional definition of humanitarian intervention. This complexity, including force protection problems, also made cooperation and coordination between air and ground elements critical. Third, the Pelican experience underscored the value of prepositioning aircraft, personnel, and equipment in areas of likely demand, and thus the value of France’s network of African bases.

FRANCE AS A KEY PARTNER

The high level of French civilian and military engagement in the worldwide humanitarian sphere, together with a relevant overseas basing structure and significant tactical lift assets, some forward deployed, make France a key partner for coalition operations. In many cases, France will be a lead state for European or transatlantic efforts. Moreover, like the United States, what France does with regional militaries and other allies will have a strong influence on the capacity for local response in complex relief operations, especially in Africa. Finally, there is strong professional interest among French planners and operators in developing closer military-to-military cooperation with the United States on support of relief operations. Because France is likely to be a strong force behind future EU defense efforts, including expeditionary capabilities, more effective cooperation with France at the political and operational levels can translate into a more effective overall partnership with European allies in managing humanitarian crises.