



France's War in Mali

Lessons for an Expeditionary Army

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This report discusses the 2013 French Army operations in Mali (Operation Serval) to provide a model for an expeditionary force that has attributes and competencies the United States Army seeks. The French demonstrated that they are adept at fielding small yet capable forces tailored for specific objectives and reiteratively task organizing as the situation evolves. They also have a culture and force structure geared for expeditionary operations.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What should an expeditionary force look like, how should it be organized, what capabilities should it have, and how should it be deployed and sustained?
- How can the United States Army operate at a smaller scale and tailor force packages for specific needs?
- What does an expeditionary, regionally aligned force—one that meets a number of United States Army desiderata regarding tailorability, scalability at a level lower than a brigade, and light deployment and sustainment requirements—look like?
- What compromises and risks are entailed in designing a force to be more expeditionary?



KEY FINDINGS

Operation Serval Provides an Example of How a Technologically Sophisticated Army Organizes and Fields an Expeditionary Force.

- The French Army exhibits many of the traits outlined by General Raymond Odierno in his vision of the future force.
- The French Army in Mali operated using small, scalable, and task-organized combined arms forces and built them up or folded them into larger, scalable formations.

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French Requirements Have Led the Army to Adopt a Force Structure Well Suited for Operations Such as Serval.

- The French use relatively lightly armored wheeled vehicles, which have smaller sustainment requirements compared with heavier, tracked vehicles.
- The French prefer mobility over protection, a choice that reflects their cultural and doctrinal emphasis on maneuver.
- The French Army draws on an expeditionary culture, which reportedly makes coping with austerity a point of pride and also reinforces certain approaches toward operating among local populations.

The French Way of War Represented by Serval Might Not Be Optimal for U.S. Commanders, Who Have Greater Resources at Their Disposal.

- Those resources enable Americans to minimize risk in a manner that the French cannot.
- Serval does not shed light on France's capacity to handle more-intense conventional conflicts or provide conventional deterrent power.
- The French are confident that their success on the battlefield and low casualty rate demonstrate the proficiency of their military, but they took large risks.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The Army should examine the French experience for additional insights, including in the following areas:

- the advisability of reducing protection and fielding lighter vehicles to enhance mobility and reduce sustainment requirements, and in particular the introduction of a vehicle with the weight, protection level, and firepower of the VBCI
- the potential advantages and costs of pushing modularity below the brigade level to facilitate battalion and company-sized combined arms deployments
- the impact of digitization on small-unit operations
- the integration of intelligence into lower-echelon operations
- training to enable company commanders to conduct decentralized, combined arms operations and practice mission command
- French insights into training and interoperating with West African and Sahelian security forces
- the costs of France's rotational equipping strategy (PEGP) and its effect on readiness.