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## The Unforeseen 2012 Crisis in Mali: The Diverging Outcomes of Risk and Threat Analyses

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### ABSTRACT

The 2012 crisis in Mali, where the state collapsed and terrorist groups took over the north, came as a surprise to many. Mali had been considered a poster-child for democracy and was judged as considerably more stable than its neighbors by leading quantitative indices of state fragility. This article explores how quantitative risk and qualitative threat approaches led to incomplete analyses, and how bureaucratic processes stifled a holistic diagnosis of the situation in Mali. French and Dutch government views are analyzed, adding new empirical information on how ministries and embassies were unwilling to call out disconcerting developments in Mali.

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The crisis that engulfed Mali in early 2012 surprised many policymakers and analysts alike. Within several months a separatist Tuareg uprising had violently evicted the security forces from the north of the country, a handful of junior officers and noncommissioned officers had launched a coup d'état, and subsequently the Tuareg rebels saw their uprising hijacked by three *Salafi-jihadist* groups. Mali had abruptly turned from a poor but relatively peaceful and stable West-African country to one where an appointed interim government attempted to govern the southern remnant of the country (and keep the influence of the junta limited), with the north—two thirds of the country—de facto an Islamic state controlled by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its partners. As perceived by its neighbors and expressed by UN resolutions and reports, the situation entailed a humanitarian crisis and a threat to international peace and security.<sup>1</sup> When the *Salafi-jihadist* groups unexpectedly attacked southern Mali in January 2013, France intervened and used a large military force to evict the terrorist groups from the north. In July/August 2013 presidential elections were held, and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) of nearly 12,000 peacekeepers was established to help the government reassert its authority in the north and assist the peace process. A May 2013 international donor conference held in Brussels, Belgium, raised €3,25 billion in pledges for aid and reconstruction projects. The costs of the 2012 crisis, in human suffering, have been enormous

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and Mali is currently characterized by a fragile peace accord and a deteriorating security situation.

Open sources indicate that the prevailing analysis of Mali before the 2012 crisis was a rosy one. Western Ministries of Foreign Affairs saw Mali as a “poster child” for democracy in an otherwise volatile region.<sup>2</sup> At the same time it was a “donor darling” for the international aid community, receiving hundreds of millions of dollars in aid money, with aid surging during the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s. According to Craven-Matthews and Englebert, from 1967 to 2013 Mali received an average of 15 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from aid, in contrast to 3.75 percent for the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>3</sup> On the Fund for Peace’s “Failed States Index” in 2011, Mali was placed in 76th position, on a par with India, while neighboring Niger—that shared many problems, such as Tuareg separatism—stood at 15th place.<sup>4</sup> With the exception of Algeria (81st place) and Senegal (85th), most of Mali’s seven neighbors were estimated to be much more fragile: Côte d’Ivoire (10th), Guinea (11th), Burkina Faso (37th), and Mauritania (42nd). AON, a global financial services company that provides an annual “Political Risk Map” used by insurers worldwide, judged in 2011 that Mali was at lesser risk of political upheaval than nearly all its neighbors.<sup>5</sup> There was certainly awareness that Tuareg separatism was a latent problem, with the peace process faltering after the 2006 uprising, the third since independence in 1960.<sup>6</sup> The problem of AQIM in the north was also well known, with a significant body of academic literature focusing on the kidnappings of Western tourists and terrorist attacks in the region.<sup>7</sup> So why did the collapse of Mali come as such a surprise? Considering the huge costs of the crisis—in terms of suffering and money—a more accurate appraisal of the situation could have allowed different actors, from the Malian government to the international community—to invest in preventing or cushioning the crisis.

One reason is that Mali’s crisis did not occur overnight. Rather, it was a combination of different events, each precipitating or triggering a next event. With the benefit of hindsight, several turning points can be identified. The fall of the Gadhafi regime and the exodus of several thousand Tuareg fighters back to Mali served as the initial catalyst. In October 2011, two Tuareg groups striving for an independent Azawad joined forces to form the *Mouvement national pour la libération de l’Azawad* (MNLA), which formed an informal alliance with three *Salafi-jihadist* groups (AQIM, its offshoot ‘Mouvement pour l’unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest’ (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine). The first turning point constituted the start of the armed insurrection on 17 January 2012. The second turning point concerned the coup on 22 March 2012. It occurred weeks before the first round of the presidential election was planned (27 April), ending two decades of democratic elections. President Amadou Toumani Touré (popularly referred to by the acronym ATT) fled the country, with few Malians mourning his departure. The coup accelerated the military’s rout in the north, with the cities Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal falling into rebel hands. The third and final turning point concerned the takeover of the north by the three Al Qaeda–affiliated groups. The MNLA was violently evicted by the better resourced Al Qaeda groups. The result was a full-fledged terrorist sanctuary, encompassing two thirds of Mali’s territory. The contrast with Mali’s situation at the end of 2011 could not have been more stark. Was the crisis unforeseen as the result of a methodological issue?

## Separate Worlds of Risk and Threat

Scholarly literature on risk and threat analyses is clustered in different scientific disciplines. Risk assessment and risk management are in many respects regarded as scientific disciplines *per se*, and risk analysis is essential to engineering, the health sector, general economic activity, and the insurance business, among others. From international standards such as the ISO 27000 series to legislation on compliance, risk management has been integrated into many business and scientific fields, with several academic journals dedicated to the topic.<sup>8</sup> Political risk is a subset of the broader risk assessment field, and is in part focused on coverage for expropriation. While consensus on terminology is elusive, risk is commonly distinguished from uncertainty when the probability distribution of the factors studied can be determined objectively.<sup>9</sup> As such, risk is seen as the quantitative multiplication of the probability of the occurrence of an event by its estimated impact. When the probability is estimated on a subjective basis, this is labeled as uncertainty. In practice, much of risk assessment falls in this category, as many values and probabilities cannot be determined objectively.

Like risk, there is no single agreed-on definition of threat. Threats are generally understood as the intention of an actor to cause deliberate harm to someone or something. Although natural causes like hurricanes or floods can certainly “threaten” communities, in the social sciences the concept of threat is rooted in security studies. As the parameters of security have widened to nonmilitary phenomena, with human security now as much an object as state security, an associate broadening of the definition of threat would be logical.<sup>10</sup> Traditionally, however, safety studies (often the technical disciplines) focus on natural causes or human accidents, while malicious actors and actions fall in the field of security studies. A threat therefore has the potential to adversely impact organizational operations (including mission, functions, image, or reputation), organizational assets, or individuals. A threat is a *potential* for harm. The presence of a threat does not mean that it will necessarily cause actual harm. It is on the *nature* of the occurrences.

Concerning intelligence studies and threat analyses, a large body of research has formed around intelligence failures, investigating how analysts missed crucial threats to peace. From Pearl Harbor to Operation Barbarossa and Yom Kippur to 11 September 2001 (9/11), scholars have tried to determine whether the intelligence failure was one of collection or analysis, or both, or whether the policymaker was unwilling to heed the warning.<sup>11</sup> In many cases national security was at stake, with agencies and analysts following and focusing on certain developments, which were then missed or misinterpreted. There is also the broader field of indicator and early warning analyses.<sup>12</sup> During the Cold War, techniques were improved after decades of observing and analyzing the opponent’s behavior. While this field also applies to nonstate actors, it is more difficult to identify indicators that capture the few predictable paths that these groups need to follow when executing operations.<sup>13</sup> The core requirement for successful indicator and warning analyses remains a sharp focus on the actor/subject in question, time and energy to hone understanding of its behavior, and then the ability to identify deviations from the norm. For Africa, several early warning systems have been set up in the field of conflict prevention, management, and resolution.<sup>14</sup> There have been some generic

studies into the effectivity of these mechanisms, but they have not focused in detail on specific case studies.<sup>15</sup>

This article explores how the quantitative risk and qualitative threat approach deal with analyzing threats to fragile states. Theoretically, causality could be demonstrated by either inferring it statistically or by observation as a process. A comparative study by Tang et al. investigated how both approaches addressed the question, “does oil cause ethnic war?”. They concluded that a quantitative approach alone cannot establish causal mechanisms, including its contextual impact, but that a qualitative approach has some critical advantages, such as focusing on deep causes.<sup>16</sup> The focus on causality resulted in a more fine-grained and accurate assessment. The importance of investigating causal mechanisms is supported by other studies.<sup>17</sup> In the practical execution of research, additional problems with quantitative research are often a lack of agreement on coding and what should be the basic data set. These scholars believe that we must rely on statistical relations and logical inferences, because causality is not directly observable. By investigating how the quantitative and qualitative approaches were applied to Mali and what was observed and what was not, a clearer indication of the biases of each methodology can be distilled.

## Quantitative Risk Analyses

The Fragile States Index (FSI) is the most well-known country fragility index and a primary example of a quantitative risk assessment based on specific indicators. There are many indices for measuring fragility, as comprehensively analyzed by Mata and Ziaja in their report “User’s Guide on Measuring Fragility.”<sup>18</sup> At the time of their report (2009), there were eleven indices, including the Political Instability Index by the Economist Group, the World Bank’s Country Policy and Institutional Assessment and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI). Some have since suffered a quiet demise, while others have been refashioned. The Failed State Index, for example, was re-baptized the Fragile State Index in 2014.<sup>19</sup> Each index or ranking uses different data sources, methodologies, and displays. Important are the underlying notions: does the index measure the fragility of the state, or of society in general? Also debated is whether violent conflict is a cause, symptom, or consequence of fragility. The underlying assumptions and foci often remain undefined. Mali was ranked differently by each index, but the scores did not deviate significantly from the general conclusion that the country was stable by regional standards. The BTI, for example, which detailed its methodology in a more transparent fashion than the FSI, put Mali in second place (after Ghana) in its regional findings for West and Central Africa in 2012.<sup>20</sup>

The fragility indices can be qualified as variants of risk analyses. By using empirical data, standardizing certain values, aggregating results, and then weighting the scores, results are *calculated*. A consistent methodology is used for all countries and applied in a centralized fashion. Central to the methodological process are indicators. These have been identified as valuable terms of measurement—metrics—and quantified (if they do not already consist of numbers) to allow scoring. As with many risk management approaches, the emphasis lies not on the exact probability of an event and the estimated impact of its eventual occurrence, but rather the identification of several variables

indicating positive measures (e.g., an organization's preparation for an event) or negative developments (risk, or in this case state fragility). From a logical perspective the fragility indices do not estimate the probability of state collapse, as the outcome of state fragility can lead to many different forms of political and economic incidents and crises, all varying in severity and impact.

There has been significant criticism of the FSI and other fragility indices. At a fundamental level, the very concept of "fragile state" has been questioned, as it presupposes successful states. Some argue that the term is a construct coined by the West to enhance the legitimacy of major donor-led reforms in the financing of development aid, promoting Western policy "remedies" such as state-building and peace-building interventions for poverty and war.<sup>21</sup> At a more substantive level, criticism of the FSI can be clustered around several themes including its effect, usefulness as a policy instrument, emphasis on internal (national) factors, problems of logic and inference, and correct use of statistical data. Some authors contend that it focuses on symptoms rather than causes of fragility. Others argue that the FSI places too much emphasis on the importance of state institutions—implying more state building as a policy solution—while at the same time underestimating the (negative) impact of Western foreign policy choices.<sup>22</sup> Questions are also placed at the assumptions underpinning the interpretation of empirical data and the valuation of local constructs. For example, sharp population growth, authoritarian regime type, and low GDP are all implied to increase state fragility. This, however, may not be supported by empirical data.<sup>23</sup>

Opaque methodologies prevent an analysis of why the fragility indices led to such an optimistic picture of Mali pre-2012. According to the Fund for Peace, country rankings are calculated using twelve specific indicators across four categories or dimensions: Cohesion, Economic, Political, and Social. Over 100 sub-indicators are used, but they remain unspecified and no definitive list is given.<sup>24</sup> It is further unclear which metrics are used. Three types of data are used: (1) content analysis; (2) quantitative data sets; and (3) qualitative review. The content analysis involves a scan of millions of documents (media articles, reports, etc.) to assess the salience of each sub-indicator in each country. The actual process remains unspecified.<sup>25</sup> In short, the possibility of validating a calculation—a core tenet of a scientific approach—is absent.

An alternative would be to investigate whether certain indicators would have been able to identify causes or contributors to the crisis in Mali. While the causes of the crisis can be manifold (see the next section), a sectoral approach, for example, would investigate the security component that led to the crisis. This would focus on the strength of the actors posing a threat, such as the MNLA insurgent and AQIM terrorist groups, and offset this against the capacity and ability of Mali's security forces to counter them. The first aspect—measuring the strength of nonstate armed groups—is notoriously difficult to do, even for seasoned intelligence analysts. The capability of security forces is also difficult to measure, for different reasons. On paper the Malian army would not have differed significantly from its regional peers. The few units that were trained by French and U.S. forces appeared to perform reasonably in combat in early 2012, but nearly all other Malian units disintegrated on contact with the enemy.<sup>26</sup> Unit personnel strength is easy to measure, operational readiness is more difficult (although some countries calculate this for their own units), but battlefield efficacy escapes quantification.

Other, more indirect contributors to the crisis would have been equally difficult to capture in metrics. All the fragility indices use economic indicators, and build on the premise that economic development has a positive correlation with political stability. Most of Mali's economy is agricultural and informal, and escapes realistic quantification in figures. The empirical data generated by Western economies is frequently absent in developing countries, or difficult to collect and unreliable when provided. Political indicators are equally difficult to operationalize as quantifiable metrics. Elections are regarded as positive factors for stability, but events in the Balkans and Iraq, for instance, undermine this fundamental assumption. Here elections led to an increase in sectarianism, cemented the position of spoilers in society, and ultimately contributed to further instability.<sup>27</sup> During the 2002 and 2007 presidential elections in Mali, there were serious instances of fraud, with the electoral committee annulling half a million votes in 2002.<sup>28</sup> Between 1991 and 2012, turnout was extremely low at around thirty percent each time, and even less for the parliamentary elections.<sup>29</sup> Close observers were well aware of the façade of Malian democracy, and estimated that ATT was not so much fairly elected as anointed by his predecessor, President Alpha Oumar Konaré, in 2002. Nonetheless, the country's reputation as a "poster child for democracy" stuck.

When determining which indicators are best used for measuring fragility, the debate on metrics for progress during counterinsurgency (COIN) operations can provide valuable insights. The Western intervention in Afghanistan (2001–present) grappled with the dilemma of how to measure the effect of military and development policies. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) initially focused on the number of incidents and killed/wounded in action (on both the enemy and their own sides), not dissimilar to the U.S. military's reliance on body counts during the Vietnam war. Security, however, is more complex than tallying incidents and losses.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes insurgents exerted such control over an area that they did not need to launch attacks. As part of COIN doctrine, David Kilcullen proposed using other metrics to analyze progress and security. Potential indicators for local security could be the price of vegetables and fruit, assassination/kidnap rate, where local officials sleep, and where their business interests lie.<sup>31</sup> On the development side, statistics often focused on the *input* of the international effort—for instance, money spent—or the *output*, such as schools built—rather than the *outcome*, such as children finishing school. It raises the question how the qualitative approach—compared to the quantitative—then deals with such issues.

## A Qualitative Threat Approach

The broad body of qualitative research on Mali pre-2012 can be divided into two groups: generic social sciences and specific security studies. Authors like Benjamin Soares, Bas Lecocq, Georg Klute, and others focused on the role of Islam, tribal politics, local politics, and Sahelian cultures, noting the complexities of Malian society and the nuances of different societal developments.<sup>32</sup> A separate body of academic research, rooted in the field of security studies, focused on the specific terrorist groups that claimed responsibility for the attacks and hostage-takings occurring in the Sahel. Jean-Pierre Filiu, Mathieu Guidère, and Djallil Lounnas focused on whether AQIM was a local Algerian organization, or a global Al Qaeda one, and what role it played in the



Arab Spring.<sup>33</sup> Several scholars expressed their skepticism regarding the assumption then underpinning the Global War on Terrorism, and U.S. (and Algerian) policy to include the Sahel in counterterrorism efforts. A 2004 article in *Air Force Magazine* titled “Swamp of Terror in the Sahara” warned that “Unless unchecked, the terrorist infestation could turn parts of Africa into launchpads for tomorrow’s murderous outrages.”<sup>34</sup> The article embodied the policy hyperbole on terrorism and ungoverned spaces, and was extensively cited by scholars as an example of securitization. Jeremy Keenan took a more radical view, arguing that the terrorist threat had actually been fabricated by Algeria (and the United States) to further geopolitical and economic interests.<sup>35</sup> Keenan expanded the theme of state terrorism, arguing that the Algerian intelligence service (DRS) was at the heart of AQIM.<sup>36</sup> Coherent with this take, he and other authors argued that the Malian state had become more unstable, not so much due to growing radicalism, but rather as a direct result of U.S. and Malian counterterrorist policies.<sup>37</sup>

Concerning the qualitative threat analysis, it is important to determine which threat actor is threatening which object. Is the object the Malian state, government, or society, and are the malicious threat actors insurgents, criminals, or terrorists?<sup>38</sup> If applied to a terrorist grouping, a threat approach investigates the possibility of the group conducting operations against certain targets. Because it involves human intent, a threat is difficult to calculate. In contrast to risk analyses, therefore, threat analyses are qualitative and not quantitative in nature, and specific rather than generic. The focus lies on the malicious actor. In the intelligence sector a threat analysis is frequently accompanied by a predictive element. For example, potential aggressive military operations by an adversary will be estimated on a spectrum that can range from impossible, highly unlikely to highly likely or ultimately, imminent. This estimation is generally further circumscribed by a disclaimer framework, accompanying the judgment with a statement of high or low confidence.<sup>39</sup> As most scholarly research on fragile states and terrorism does not seek to forecast but to elucidate, this framework is absent in the social sciences.

The design of a threat analysis often involves the identification of drivers. When analyzing developments in the field of international affairs or conflict studies, three layers can generally be distinguished: events, patterns of events, and drivers. Drivers are at the “deepest” level and have a causal relationship with the pattern of events.<sup>40</sup> They are not only useful for analysis and scenario building, but their identification can help policymakers influence the pattern of events towards certain desired directions. Within some military intelligence units, analyses are made through so-called driver-based scenario building. In this approach drivers on actors are generated through a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats inventory.<sup>41</sup> A causal loop diagram for the drivers on factors is made for the different drivers and factors involved. This consists of nodes (the variables, or drivers in this case) and edges; the links that indicate a connection or relationship between nodes. It is not known whether such analyses were made before the Mali crisis of 2012, but several actor/factor driver-based threat analyses were made for the MINUSMA mission in Mali in the years after the crisis.<sup>42</sup>

Intelligence reports frequently use the categories of activities, capabilities, and intentions to structure analyses. Rather than the indicators of risk analyses, a threat approach identifies drivers—factors or processes that contribute to violent conflict. Researchers often disagree which ones matter: greed or grievance; push or pull.<sup>43</sup> A threat approach



also faces different methodological challenges than a risk approach. Whereas a risk approach is predicated on a systematic process, a calculation of certain selected variables and metrics, a threat estimation frequently lacks a structured methodology that is similar to a risk analysis. This mirrors post-crisis research, where the term “root causes” can serve as a label without methodological basis. Important, therefore, is clarity on the conceptual framework used when analyzing potential threats posed by actors.

A qualitative approach to state fragility and human security, focusing on threats, therefore produces different results from a risk approach. While the latter is predicated on a structured methodology—that is albeit flawed—a threat approach often lacks one in the first place. And if there are structured approaches present, they may vary consistently. With relative consensus among the indices on Mali’s stability, the (threat) literature on Mali pre-crisis is characterized by extremes poles of interpretation. Media and policy discourse emphasized the terrorist threat, juxtaposed by the albeit minority claim that terrorism was a fabricated construct, camouflaging oil and geopolitical interests. At the same time studies were generally narrow analyses, focusing on specific malicious actors, or covering an element in the political, economic, or social domain. The country was the exclusive research domain of a handful of experts, each working from a specific scientific discipline and on a narrow topic. Holistic approaches were lacking, and as such the general fragility of the Malian society and state was not recognized. Between 2001 and 2012 the International Crisis Group, as purveyor of quality analyses of fragile states, wrote only one report on Mali—the 2005 study of Sahelian terror threats.<sup>44</sup> Since the crisis erupted in 2012, it has published several reports annually. If there is no consensus that a state or region is prone to crises, very little research will focus on it. Once a crisis has erupted, it attracts all the attention.

## Comparing Threat and Risk Analyses

There is a fundamental difference in the methodological orientation of risk and threat assessments. As a result, they have different characteristics. They will be arranged in the next table. Before doing so, however, the differences in orientation at its deepest methodological level—the  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ —need explanation. The  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  concern erroneous outcomes of hypothesis testing. The  $\alpha$  is the chance that an observer *incorrectly* concludes that there is a significant relationship between phenomena. The  $\beta$  is the chance that one does *not discover* a weak, but actual existing, relationship between phenomena. In statistical hypothesis testing, these are analogous to a type I error where a true null hypothesis is incorrectly rejected (a false positive) and a type II error corresponds to incorrectly retaining a false null hypothesis (a false negative). In an analogy between statistical testing and a judge’s decision (where the null hypothesis equates to the presumption of innocence), a Type 1 error concerns the conviction of an innocent person, and a type 2 the acquittal of a guilty one.<sup>45</sup> In the field of international relations, an example of a type 1 error is the rejection of the hypothesis that Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction; a type 2 error is the failure to determine a link between the arrested Al Qaeda member Zacarias Moussaoui and the other hijackers, after his flight instructor became suspicious and informed the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Put differently, the  $\alpha$  is on proof and explanation—on the certainty of the

relationships discovered—and the  $\beta$  on the relationships missed. A risk assessment, therefore, is aimed at reducing the  $\alpha$  (and the probability of a false positive). A threat analysis primarily aims at not missing a threat, reducing the value of the  $\beta$ .

To produce forecasts in the risk assessment column, sufficient data need to be present to produce correlations with a satisfying/set level of significance. This limits the time span that risk assessments can remain valid. Drivers, on the contrary, deal with the deep-level processes that characterize longer-term threat assessments. Quantitative analysis is per definition trend oriented. Only when a qualitative analysis is also made can other factors be incorporated. In driver-based scenario building, the speed and direction in which drivers evolve are assessed. The focus lies on core uncertainties, with the objective of making an inventory of the drivers with the highest impact and the highest uncertainty. Those drivers will then be selected to construct the axes of the scenario. These scenarios can be enriched by a system of qualitatively selected critical indicators. These critical indicators are—as a result of the selection process—unique for every case. The indicators used in the FSI or other fragility indices, however, are generic for the whole sample of countries under investigation. In risk analyses the emphasis lies on mitigating impact and occurrence, and the focus lies not on unique cases but rather a systematic overview. In contrast, a threat analysis uses the data unique to the case to develop an understanding at the level of drivers.

The quantitative approach, associated with risk management and inherent to the indices on state fragility, therefore has certain characteristics and biases that determine what is observed and what is not. First, the format—numbers, rankings, even color-codings—impress the recipient with a notion of accuracy and reliability when neither is necessarily present, and distort proportions, times, or other dimensions through the chosen display. Numbers and visuals—certainly in relation to state fragility—inherently obscure nuance and over-simplify the intricate. Second, while a methodology is clearly present for calculating scores, this can be built on untested or hidden assumptions. When the methodology is not transparent, as it is for several fragility indices—these presuppositions remain camouflaged, and calculations cannot be validated. Third, it remains difficult to identify metrics that operationalize indicators. While electoral turnout, security incidents, or police strength can be quantified, many others cannot. Another issue is how to weigh and aggregate these numbers to the final “fragility” score. Finally, the purpose of these indices needs consideration. They can serve as guidance for general (strategic) policy advice, but early warning will only work when indicators are sensitive enough to register small but relevant variations and reporting is at regular but short intervals. Annual indices are by their very nature unqualified for early warning.

In a large study comparing U.S. military theater-level assessments in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, Connable researched the use of metrics and assessments.<sup>46</sup> He concluded that centralized and decontextualized quantitative methods shaped counterinsurgency assessments at the expense of contextual, relevant qualitative data and comprehensive analytical methods. While quantitative data can still be valuable for a commander's assessments, his core message was that context is king. Further investigation into the efficacy of metrics for progress (focus on the positive) and indicators of fragility (bias toward the negative) could generate valuable insights. Some of these problems can be countered by driver-based scenario building, at least in theory. The

advantage is that drivers can identify possible points of mitigation, highlighting policy options in certain areas.

Are these findings in line with studies on international relations? All the problems for the quantitative approach—coding, basic set of data—are present. These are further aggravated, however, by issues as untested and hidden assumptions, oversimplifications, imperviousness to small but important variations, a lack of calculable data, and a lack of transparency. Additional problems apply to the qualitative approach as well. This concerns issues with sources, a lack of agreement on drivers and cause-and-effect relationships that matter, and even a lack of impartiality. This last issue—impartiality—leads to a problem of a different nature—framing. Describing the dangers of applying the terrorism frame postulated by U.S. and Western policy discourse, Judith Scheele warned that “As a result, the few scholarly works that are based on an actual knowledge of the areas concerned are increasingly swallowed up by the budding literature on security concerns in the Sahara that, through its initial postulate of ‘great danger’ and ‘radical changes’ precludes in-depth local case studies or historical approaches.”<sup>47</sup> She added that “the threat” risked becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy. Academics (and analysts) searching for Islamic terrorists will probably find them, exacerbating existing misunderstandings and conceptual divisions.

## Friction

Practice does not always conform to theory. In his magnum opus *On War*, von Clausewitz distinguished friction as the concept that distinguishes real war from war on paper.<sup>48</sup> Friction is arguably not limited to war in a narrow sense but is applicable where large organizations strive to accomplish a certain mission. Friction occurs when theory collides with the practical course of events, with chance impacting decisions as well as actions. This section will investigate to what extent the Malian crisis took two European governments by surprise. The case studies concern France and the Netherlands, countries with differing but significant interests in Mali (both continued to play an important role in Mali after the crisis). The reason for this selection is twofold. First, the authors had access to French and Dutch language reports, and were able to conduct several semi-structured interviews with (former) government officials involved with policy/analyses on Mali. Second, both countries saw Mali as an important partner but from different perspectives. For France, Mali was vital for security (and economic and cultural) reasons. For the Netherlands the development aid sector played a pivotal role. By focusing on the governments’ assessments of the situation on the ground, it will become clear if and how these countries’ analyses diverged from the public indices on the Malian state fragility. After all, intelligence analysts and policymakers equally use open source data for their own analyses and policy advice. This section will further investigate which agencies within government held particular viewpoints on Mali’s fragility. In doing so, it will compare how intelligence communities viewed Mali, and what the analyses of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs were, distinguishing between the ministries in the capitals and the French and Dutch embassies in Bamako. These disparate organizational units have diverging interests, outlooks, and standpoints.

Both France and the Netherlands represent different relationships that Western countries have with African ones, potentially revealing how the prisms of geopolitics and development aid can lead to different understandings of the local situation. France, as the former colonial power in Mali, retained strong political, economic, and cultural ties with Mali and Francophone West Africa. The Netherlands was an important donor country, having provided hundreds of millions of euros in development aid to Mali in the decade before the 2012 crisis, and continuing to do so afterward. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) community as a whole also deserves mention. As Steven Esquith argued, power shifted in Mali from a traditional process of constitutional dialog and democratic deliberation to an arrangement of corrupt “consensus” politics controlled by government officials, donors, and the participation of NGOs.<sup>49</sup> These NGOs were therefore no longer innocent bystanders but accommodated themselves to state corruption. The other major power in the Sahel was the United States, having launched and run several multi- and bilateral counterterrorist programs from its African Command (AFRICOM) after 9/11. As these programs and the underlying U.S. interests have been covered extensively elsewhere, the next section will focus on the French and Dutch positions.

### The French Perspective

France remained an important player in Bamako after its independence in 1960. In contrast to other West African Francophone countries, French influence was more indirect from a political–military and an economic perspective. No military intervention took place between independence and Operation Serval, and the country was much less enmeshed in the “Francafrique” network that characterized many of its neighbors.<sup>50</sup> From a domestic and political perspective there was the question of hostages; in 2011 seven different French nationals were held in captivity by AQIM. Government policy focused on both negotiating their release (and paying ransoms) as well as conducting violent rescue attempts by special forces if and when the opportunity arose. As such, the Sahel was a priority for France’s foreign intelligence service (la direction générale de la sécurité extérieure [DGSE]), so much so that operators involved in France’s largest military operation at the time, in the dangerous Afghan district of Surobi, felt that they were the fifth wheel on the wagon.<sup>51</sup> The *Salafi-jihadists* considered France and French interests as their main target and AQIM’s links to diaspora in France made them a direct threat to national security. As a result, French intelligence had a strong focus on the *jihadist* groups, collecting intelligence on their capabilities, activities, and intentions. One of their primary goals was to find out where the hostages were being held, and secure their release, either through negotiations or French military operations. In March 2012 the DGSE briefly learned of the whereabouts of several leading AQIM commanders in Timbuktu and a special forces raid was considered but eventually rejected by President Sarkozy.<sup>52</sup>

The DGSE had a strong focus on the tribal dynamics in the north and national politics in Bamako. Many authors in France, as well as Mali, suspect that the DGSE have a strong pro-Tuareg bias.<sup>53</sup> Their respect for the “blue warriors” appears in part historical, in part a result of the Tuareg’s practical assistance in securing the release of hostages.

This bias, however, not only shaped perception in Southern Mali of France aiding and abetting separatists, but even influenced inter-ministerial relations in Paris. According to author Jean-Christophe Notin, diplomats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), or the *Quai d'Orsay*, felt that the DGSE's reports were so pro-Tuareg that they stopped reading them.<sup>54</sup> The DGSE did not foresee the creation of Ansar Dine, the *Salafi-jihadist* Tuareg group that was formed in the fall of 2011 by Iyad Ag Ghali, but was certainly well aware of the dynamics leading to the January 2012 attack.<sup>55</sup> After the attack was launched, even open source intelligence would have provided ample information on the MNLA and their progress on the battlefield in the north. Having learned from the "Arab Spring" demonstrations in 2011, the MNLA extensively used social media platforms like Facebook to coordinate, direct, and publicize their military operations.

Reports indicate that the DGSE had an equally strong understanding of Malian politics. It was no secret that corruption had hollowed out the state, and apparently the French intelligence agency even had proof of collusion between ATT and the *jihadists*, with details on how a senior member of his entourage informed AQIM.<sup>56</sup> The DGSE also had good intelligence on the state of the Malian security forces, predicting on 19 March that a military coup would probably take place on Saturday 24 March.<sup>57</sup> It occurred two days earlier than predicted. While indicative of good sources and a thorough understanding of the dynamics in Bamako, this warning still needs contextualization. An advisor at the Elysée palace—the presidential cabinet—noted that hardly a week went by without a warning of a possible coup somewhere in Africa.<sup>58</sup> At the same time it is unclear what French policymakers could realistically have done with the information provided.

The French MFA had its own sources and opinions on developments in Mali. At the central level in Paris, policymakers were aware that Malian society suffered from extreme corruption and that there was collusion between the state and organized crime. For policymakers, the turning point that dispelled all doubts was the "Air Cocaine" affair of 2009, where a Boeing 727 loaded with drugs landed in the desert and was burned after unloading.<sup>59</sup> In Bamako, Ambassador Christian Rouyer, a generalist with experience in France's prefectures and humanitarian work, succeeded Michel Reveyrand de Menthon in March 2011. The latter had been ambassador for four years and would later become the European Union's Special Sahel Envoy. According to Notin, Ambassador Rouyer concluded that corruption had permeated Malian institutions, up to and including the presidential office, but more importantly, he was the first ambassador to say so openly.<sup>60</sup> For him the Malians were in complete denial of the problems facing their country. Malian officials in turn accused France of exaggerating the fundamentalist threat, with the French MFA's warnings of insecurity scaring away tourists that were so vital to the economy. For the embassy in Bamako, the diplomats in 2011 estimated that their leeway to shape or influence ATT's policy was severely restricted. They needed all his assistance on the delicate issue of the French hostages held by the *jihadists*.

The French MFA was reluctant to criticize the Malian government or acknowledge fundamental problems. Laurent Bigot, nicknamed Mr. Mali by the French press, was deputy director of the West Africa Department and visited Mali in the fall of 2011. He wrote a note warning of the explosive situation, but it had no effect. In July 2012, he

gave a presentation on the situation in Mali at an academic conference of the *Institut Français des relations internationales* in Paris.<sup>61</sup> Discarding the language of diplomacy, he emphasized how the West did not want to see the extent of corruption in Mali, arguing that a feeling of superiority and intellectual laziness had led many to accept the phenomenon of corruption as part of African culture. Serious incidents of electoral fraud in the previous decade had been systematically downplayed, as Mali's reputation as a poster-boy for democracy continued to be lauded by Western observers. Since much of the population continued to languish in poverty, radical Islam offered one of the few outlets. Bigot finished his presentation by predicting that Burkina Faso would be next to collapse. He was proven right in October 2014, when the country erupted in violence after President Blaise Compaoré attempted to change the constitution to further prolong his 27 years in office. Even after the collapse of Mali, Bigot's politically incorrect description of Mali as a façade-democracy was unwelcome, and probably contributed to his firing hardly a year later.<sup>62</sup> He subsequently founded a consultancy advising on African affairs, and argued that many of the indicators and drivers of the crisis in Mali applied equally to its neighbors.<sup>63</sup> Before Mali's collapse, the French MFA did not share—or at least espouse—the view that Mali's political system was corrupt to the core, preferring to stay optimistic and focus on improving cooperation.<sup>64</sup>

### The Dutch Perspective

The Dutch governmental prism for analyzing Mali originated in a different contextual setting, but led to similar outcomes, including a shared reticence to recognize and publicize the spoiler role of the Malian government. For the Dutch MFA, Mali was one of 15 partner countries earmarked for significant development aid. In 2010 Bamako received at least €42 million through bilateral channels and more through multilateral programs, making Mali the second largest recipient of Dutch aid after Afghanistan (where the Dutch contributed more than 2,000 soldiers to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] ISAF mission).<sup>65</sup> In 2011, the MFA recalibrated the focus for development aid, reducing the number of countries that were earmarked for large donor projects. Mali remained one of the primary recipients of Dutch donor aid, and the government's letters to Parliament took note of programs where fraud/corruption had been discovered. The bilateral relationship between both countries was good, and in December 2011 President ATT was welcomed by Queen Beatrix for an official state visit. His visit occurred one month after Dutch citizen Sjaak Rijke was abducted by AQIM fighters in Timbuktu (together with a Swedish and South African citizen), and concerns about the security situation in northern Mali were covered by the Dutch media. During ATT's stay in the Netherlands, he mentioned the influx of Tuareg fighters from Libya and requested material assistance for the Malian armed forces. Dutch press coverage of the visit, however, focused more on how skilled the Malian government was in attracting donor money.<sup>66</sup>

The Dutch development community in Mali objected to a what they perceived as possible “securitization” of their domain. Their concern was not unfounded with studies indicating that development aid was being recalibrated to fit the goals of the Global War on Terror.<sup>67</sup> As such, the MFA sought to keep Mali out of the remit of the



intelligence community. In the Netherlands, foreign intelligence operations are conducted by the two intelligence agencies, the general intelligence and security service (AIVD) and the military intelligence and security service (MIVD). To coordinate and allocate their operations and analytical foci, the government establishes a classified tasking instruction, allocating countries as well as topics to one of the two intelligence services. This mission list, that is regularly updated, is a product of a political process involving several ministries and is signed off on by the prime minister. The MFA played a strong role in the interdepartmental negotiations as one of the primary intelligence consumers, with the intelligence services vying with each other to cover—or to avoid—certain topics. Several factors influence the allocation decision making, including the military or civilian signature of the developments or threats in question and the limited capacity to cover all areas of national (security) interest. As for Mali, two (former) intelligence officials noted that the MFA wanted Mali to remain the exclusive domain of the Foreign development aid sector, and consequently neither intelligence service was designated to monitor developments there.<sup>68</sup> Libya was initially not allocated for a special intelligence focus either, but became the remit of the MIVD once NATO was involved.

The uprising in Libya, and the broader Arab Spring, had taken the Western intelligence community by surprise. Events unrolled rapidly in early 2011, and as concerns grew that Gadhafi would massacre the remnants of the uprising in Benghazi, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States started preparing for a military intervention. The U.K. government, for instance, discovered that most of its initial intelligence on Libya was based on maps dating from the Second World War and Wikipedia.<sup>69</sup> The Dutch MIVD had an equally limited information position on Libya, and started following the developments as the anti-Gadhafi protests turned violent in February 2011.<sup>70</sup> Once Gadhafi had been killed and spillover from the intervention began to impact northern Mali, the single analyst covering Libya also became responsible for reporting on these developments. In the last months of 2011, the analyst in question briefed Dutch special forces ready to be deployed to West Africa as part of the annual Flintlock training exercise. According to someone present at the briefing, the analyst concluded that the exodus of Tuareg fighters from Libya to Mali would probably not lead to armed violence in the north.<sup>71</sup> This was, as events later proved, an incorrect assessment.

Before the 2012 crisis, the Dutch MFA was reluctant to accept warnings and negative news from northern Mali. In 2010 the Department of State Fragility at the ministry in the Hague had commissioned Wolfram Lacher, a researcher from the *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (SWP), to write an internal report on the Program for Peace, Security and Development in North Mali. This program intended to strengthen the Malian state presence in the north. The report meant to investigate whether, and if so how, the Dutch government should support the initiative. The author conducted field work in Timbuktu and interviews in Bamako, and concluded that there was little political will in Bamako to address grievances in the north. Another important but politically inopportune conclusion was that the Malian state was involved in extensive collusion with organized crime and the drug trade. In addition, he estimated that the way the program was conceived would only exacerbate tensions. The reactions within the Dutch MFA to his report were negative, and although the findings were briefly discussed at an international workshop in December 2010 in Bamako, the report was not allowed to be



distributed.<sup>72</sup> Lacher later published a shorter and adapted version of the report as a Comments paper for the think tank SWP.<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

From an empirical perspective, this article has shown that many Western organizations operating in Mali were well aware of the extreme fragility of the government pre-2012. Embassies and NGOs contributed to upholding the façade, unable to disentangle themselves from the country's endemic corruption and unwilling to reconsider its status as a "donor darling." The country's elite knew how to game the system, and the international donor community became complicit in sustaining corruption through the involved preferred partnerships. As such, the frailties of the state were acknowledged but not openly discussed until late 2011. This article does not posit that the crisis could or should have been predicted or foreseen. The 2012 crisis consisted of a cascade of events, each turning out in a uniquely unfortunate way for the government in Bamako (and the citizens in the north), and precipitating a subsequent turning point. Once the crisis had run its course to the full *jihadist* occupation of the north, the framework of reference for analysts also shifted. In the journal *Foreign Affairs*, Sebastian Elischer predicted that "After Mali Comes Niger."<sup>74</sup> While he avoided any dates, six years later Niger has still been spared a crisis of this magnitude. Laurent Bigot was more prescient; he correctly identified Burkina Faso as the next government that would collapse.

Exogenous factors played an important role in the 2012 Malian crisis. The influx of Tuareg fighters that sparked the initial uprising was a direct but unintended consequence of NATO's intervention in Libya. It is possible that the French, British, and American governments had not considered this potential side-effect as the intervention was planned in haste, to prevent an impending massacre at Benghazi. Conversely, organizational dividing lines between the Middle East/North Africa (and Sub-Saharan Africa departments (traditional distinctions in business as well as governments) may have impeded an integral analysis of the possible implications of Gadhafi's removal. Several MFAs, including the Dutch and French ministries, have resorted to the use of intra-departmental Task Forces to improve policymaking on specific missions and themes. As shown by the Dutch analysis of northern Mali, however, even a holistic and detailed consideration of the factors at play can still lead to the wrong conclusions. Terrorism, and AQIM in the Sahel, remain a transnational phenomena that transcends national frontiers as well as traditional organizational boundaries within and among government ministries. Driver-based scenario building should, by its very nature, integrate exogenous factors into the analytical framework.

The authors have not been able to identify open source articles that combined a quantitative and qualitative approach to analyze the general state of Mali pre-2012. An example of a qualitative but multidisciplinary and holistic analysis is offered by the article "One Hippopotamus and Eight Blind Analysts," but it was published in 2013, after the crisis.<sup>75</sup> Here the authors argued that the complex situation in Mali, including Tuareg tribal politics, a contested political system in Bamako, *jihadist* developments in the Sahel and regional/French power relationships, could only be addressed by a multi-vocal analysis by different specialists. Using the Hippopotamus as an example— Mali's

**Table 1.** FSI and driver-based scenario building in intelligence research.

	Risk assessment, quantitative (FSI)	Threat assessment, qualitative (driver-based scenario building)
Methodology	Primarily $\alpha$ -oriented (to assess/explain)	Primarily $\beta$ -oriented (not to miss)
Focus	To assess the state of a nation	To develop policy options
Future	Present + near and mid term	Mid and long term
Level	Superficial level (indicator)	Deeper level (driver)
Continuity	Trend orientated (calculable)	Change orientated (speed and direction in which drivers develop; focus on core uncertainties)
Data	Event-based. Vulnerable for manipulated, ambivalent, incomplete, hidden, and dirty data	To test the driver-based findings. Explicitly designed to deal with data absent/ambivalent
Type of insight	Insurance-like: not pin-point, but a generalization of insights	Pin-point and case unique
Policy options	To reduce impact and occurrence	To manipulate drivers

national mascot—they illustrated how blind scholars touching different parts of an object come up with differing explanations of what it is. The article incorporated several strands of thinking and research, but is nonetheless retrospective, predominantly explaining how events unfurled and to a lesser extent why. This interdisciplinary cooperation would have been helpful before the crisis. Still, its holistic approach does not address issues as framing, friction, and impartiality. These elements remain problematic.

For Mali, the differing quantitative and qualitative approaches contributed to alternative realities, with neither contested by those in the field (who knew better). As illustrated by Table 1, the two approaches can be considered complementary rather than competing, and a well-designed driver-based scenario-building exercise offers a practical instrument that mitigates some of the biases. As such, by identifying drivers, wild cards, and causal loops, policymakers will be better able to conceptualize the threats facing fragile states. Ideally, a scenario exercise would include participants from different government agencies: policy departments, embassies, and intelligence services. Just bringing them together to exchange views contributes to transcending departmental stovepipes and mitigating inherent tensions between organizations. This would allow governments to better anticipate crises in the broader Sahel, as the region faces increasing insecurity and violent conflict. A concerted effort to aid and support African early warning systems would also benefit all parties.

The French and Dutch governmental outlook on Mali pre-2012 shows how friction, between theory and practice and between different governmental players, hampered an effective analysis of the local situation. Some government departments were well aware of the extreme fragility of the Malian state and society, but their assessments failed to reach or influence policymakers. The political element of analyzing fragility remains a challenge for national governments, and is even more problematic for international organizations. The African Union (AU)'s early warning system, for example, is hampered by member states' general reluctance to have their domestic situation assessed or even discussed by an external actor such as the AU.<sup>76</sup> As Sherman Kent noted on intelligence products, there is no effective warning if policymakers do not read the assessment, read it but do not believe it, or believe it but do not take the conclusions aboard.<sup>77</sup> The crisis in 2012 might not have been foreseen, but those immersed in Malian politics and society were not surprised.

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