

# The Caring Facade of French Imperialism

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*The “public relations” accompanying wars has become wearily predictable. Whenever one of its governments or allies conducts a military action, there is a near certainty that the European Union will host or participate in a “donors’ conference”.*

One of these grotesque events has been dedicated to Afghanistan each year since it was invaded by the US in 2001. After Gaza was bombed for three weeks in late 2008 and early 2009, the EU rushed to foot the bill for damage caused by Israel (often to infrastructure previously built or equipped with Western aid). And now the European taxpayer is expected to pick up the tab for destruction wrought by France during its military expedition in Mali.

Let me be absolutely clear: I’m fully in favour of increasing aid to healthcare and education in Mali, one of the world’s poorest countries. Yet this Wednesday’s donors’ conference – jointly organised by France and the EU – is not really designed to reduce hardship in Africa. Rather, its purpose is to cover French imperialism with a veneer of benevolence.

At this juncture, there can be no doubt that France’s “intervention” was motivated primarily by its determination to control natural resources in Mali and Niger. An analysis published in February by in-house researchers at the defence ministry in Paris points out that these two neighbouring countries possess 60% of global uranium reserves. While exploitation of these reserves by Areva, the French nuclear firm, is “certain,” according to the researchers, “instability in the Sahel has an impact on economic projects in the whole region”.

Less than a month after he was sworn in as president last year, François Hollande hinted that he regarded this uranium as effectively Areva’s property. Following talks with Mahamadou Issoufou, his counterpart from Niger, Hollande said that Areva must be allowed to extract uranium from the giant mine of Imouraren at the earliest possible date.

As the former colonial power, it was France which set the border between Mali and Niger. The Touareg people who straddle this artificial frontier have been striving for autonomy since the 1960s. Hollande has been eager to quell the recent resurgence in the Touareg struggle and to bolster the Malian authorities.

His efforts have been sold as being part of a fight against “terrorism”. A more plausible explanation is that he wishes to make sure that the uranium in this area doesn’t fall into the “wrong” hands. It is no accident that French troops were deployed earlier this year in both Mali and around the Arlit mine – a key source of uranium for Areva – in Niger.

There is a fundamental dishonesty behind this week’s donors’ conference. Briefing material prepared by its organisers gives the impression that it is part of the EU’s overall development aid activities. The objective of development aid is defined in the EU’s Lisbon

treaty as reducing and eventually eliminating poverty (indeed, the inclusion of this principle is one of the few positive things in a treaty that has a right-wing ideological orientation). Raiding the aid budget to help a resource grab in Mali runs counter to that objective. It can, therefore, be considered as illegal.

This is not the first time that the EU is violating its own law. A 2011 EU strategy paper on the Sahel blurs the distinction between military and development aid.

The pretext cited is that security is a prerequisite for progress. This ignores how it is poverty and oppression that beget conflict.

With some rare exceptions, the EU's governments have reneged on a decades-old commitment to earmark at least 0.7 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) for tackling global poverty. Diverting some of the already inadequate development aid budgets to military training exercises is tantamount to blowing raspberries at the hungry.

Apart from tiny Luxembourg, all of the EU's governments spend a higher proportion of GDP on the military than on international development. Not content with that manifest injustice, corporate-funded think tanks have pounced on the French intervention in Mali to advocate that Europe's military expenditure should be even higher.

Nick Witney, the first head of the European Defence Agency - a body tasked with boosting military cooperation between both private firms and nations - has written an especially opportunistic tract for his current employer, the European Council on Foreign Relations. Witney laments that the "crisis in Mali once again exposed the hollowness of Europe's military pretensions". France was "left to do the job alone," he writes, because of the lack of a "shared strategic culture in Europe".

His proposed solution is to have a similar level of scrutiny for the military spending of EU governments as that introduced for other types of expenditure over the past few years. This is despicable: the scrutiny to which he refers enables the Brussels bureaucracy to insist that countries eviscerate their schools and hospitals in the name of deficit reduction. Witney advocates that the same bureaucracy can simultaneously demand greater expenditure on drones.

Meanwhile, a pamphlet by Notre Europe - an institute headed by one-time European Commission chief Jacques Delors - labels many of the EU states as "free-riders" because they did not deploy fighter jets in Libya during 2011 or help France in Mali this year.

These pamphlets have been produced as part of a concerted effort to step up the pace of the EU's militarisation. You can be sure that they won't be allowed gather dust.

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