

By John Hudson

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When five members of an Islamist militant group piled into a tan Toyota Land Cruiser and drove across a remote stretch of central Mali in mid-October — they weren't alone.

Above them was a MQ-9 Reaper drone equipped with technology to collect information on the passengers and cross-reference it to a terrorism database.

The drone, operated by the U.S. military, identified one of the passengers as an explosives expert for an al-Qaeda affiliate operating on Mali's border with Burkina Faso.

The next day, a French military unit engaged the pickup, first trying to pull it over and then launching two airstrikes that destroyed the vehicle, killing everyone in it.

The operation, described to The Washington Post by French military officials and confirmed by U.S. officials, is hailed by Paris as a model for U.S.-French counterterrorism cooperation at a time when Islamist groups are proliferating across Africa's Sahel region, a vast and dry stretch of land south of the Sahara Desert.

The Biden administration appears to agree, despite [criticism from analysts](#) that terrorist attacks and violent incidents have only increased since France began its military campaign in the region eight years ago.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin informed his French counterpart in the fall that the United States would continue to provide intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support to the French mission using Washington's advanced drone and satellite technology. The United

States also said it would assist France with air refueling, medical evacuations and other logistical support.

The Biden administration's decision followed one of the most rancorous public spats in U.S.-French relations in recent memory. In September, [Paris recalled its ambassador from Washington](#) for the first time in history after the United States secretly negotiated a deal to provide nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. The U.S. agreement effectively sank a French contract worth billions to sell diesel-powered submarines to Australia. France's foreign minister called the maneuver a "[stab in the back](#)."

Scrambling to end the dispute, the White House turned to U.S. intelligence support in the Sahel, then under review by the Pentagon and National Security Council, and decided to reinforce the effort rather than scale it back.

"France has an historic presence in the region," Cynthia King, a Pentagon spokeswoman, said in a statement last week. "The U.S. supports French efforts in the region as our interests addressing significant terrorist threats align."

The episode demonstrates the Biden administration's sensitivity to accusations of mishandling relations with a key ally — an attack President Biden frequently leveled at his predecessor Donald Trump, especially regarding NATO. It also underscores how a diplomatic row in one part of the world can influence U.S. policy in another.

"Because we screwed the pooch on the submarine deal, we were looking for a way into France's good graces," said Cameron Hudson, an Africa scholar at the Atlantic Council.

"Biden's decision to recommit short-circuited an interagency process to fundamentally rethink U.S. involvement in the Sahel," he added. "They were reviewing whether to move away from a securitized strategy to a more development- and government-based strategy."

A senior U.S. official acknowledged that Washington wants to see reforms in Paris's approach to the Sahel mission. But the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive policy matters, said the White House based its decision on the shared goal of violence-reduction and a promise from the French to put a greater focus on governance and development issues.

A debate over how the United States should support France's efforts in Africa has been going on since Paris launched its military intervention in the Sahel in 2013 at the request of the Malian government. At the time, France sent troops to oust Islamist militants from towns they had seized across northern Mali. The French mission eventually morphed into Operation Barkhane, a 5,000-strong deployment of French troops to Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and other neighboring countries where the militants posed a threat.

Despite the French intervention, radical groups continued to mount attacks against government forces across the region as well as carry out deadly assaults on civilians.

By the time Biden came into office, the outlook in the Sahel looked bleak. Hundreds were dying in a spate of massacres along the border of Niger and Mali.

French public support for the mission, which was widely popular at first, was beginning to slip. And in the summer, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a decision to [withdraw more than 2,000 troops](#) by early 2022 and reorient the French presence toward military training and bolstering the democratic institutions of partner countries.

"France doesn't have the vocation or the will to stay eternally in the Sahel," said Macron. "We are there because we're asked to be."

Supporters of the U.S.-French collaboration acknowledge past setbacks but say the collaboration harnesses France's knowledge of its former colonies and doesn't require the United States to send ground troops.

“Cutting off the French is not in the U.S. interest,” said Michael Shurkin, a former CIA analyst and director at 14 North Strategies, a research firm. “France’s strategy in the Sahel is failing because of the disinterest and inability of Malian leaders to do all they need to do. We can fret but have no better ideas than the French, and, frankly, we have very little leverage with local leaders.”

Critics of the French approach say the emphasis on tracking and killing terrorists is radicalizing the local population, creating more militants and more supporters of violent Islamist groups.

“The intervention is objectively a failure,” said Alioune Tine, an independent human rights expert for the United Nations and founder of [the AfrikaJom Center think tank](#). “Far from defeating or weakening the terrorist attacks or wiping them out, we have unfortunately witnessed their reinforcement and their extension. Today, the threat extends to coastal countries, to Côte d’Ivoire, Benin, Togo, Ghana and even Senegal.”

Although governments in the Sahel sought France’s military help, some Africans see the French presence as a vestige of French colonial rule and believe international assistance would be better directed at improving government services and investing in schools and hospitals.

“The failure of the armed intervention in the Sahel has had perverse effects on Malian and African opinion, which is hostile to France, and has fostered anti-French sentiment among young people,” Tine said.

What is not in dispute is the value France places on its support from the United States.

Brig. Gen. Cyril Carcy, the defense attache at the French Embassy in Washington, said the assistance the United States provides to France is “paramount.”

He pointed to France’s killing of Islamist militants in the Toyota Land Cruiser in mid-October. The key target in the strike was Nasser al-Tergui, a senior member of Katiba Serma, an al-Qaeda affiliate responsible for numerous attacks on government troops, civilians and U.N.

workers in the Sahel. Before the strike, French forces provided U.S. counterparts with intelligence on Tergui's pattern of life and area of operation.

Using that information, U.S. drones were able to locate Tergui, and officials were then able to "cross-check" the images and phone data they collected, Carcy said. French officials subsequently confirmed the identity of Tergui and his fellow passengers in the pickup using human sources.

U.S. military personnel then provided targeting guidance to the French in their air assault on the vehicle.

"When we have the U.S. drone, it is definitely much easier," Carcy said.