

France's Conflict Resolution Strategy in Côte d'Ivoire and its Ethical Implications

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Abstract: This paper evaluates France's conflict resolution strategy by taking into account Côte d'Ivoire's internal dynamics and the wider international context over the last two decades. Contrary to the prevailing opinion, it will be argued that France, given the circumstances, has undertaken a successful conflict resolution strategy. The controversial implication of France in the 1994 Rwandan genocide made any further French military intervention on the African continent extremely problematic. In the case of the intervention in Côte d'Ivoire, however, France has succeeded in pursuing its interests with full national and international support. Much of the legitimacy of its conflict resolution strategy derives from both the lack of motivation of other international players to act and the inability of African multilateral organizations, such as ECOWAS, to cope with security issues. Since international organizations have been unable to act appropriately, accusations of French neo-colonialism made by the Gbagbo regime and the "young patriots" have never been fully addressed, and the true reconciliation and unification of Ivorian society has been hindered.

Introduction

Côte d'Ivoire, once considered a model African country in terms of political stability and economic success, has, for more than a decade, struggled with an internal crisis. Xenophobic policies revolving around the concept of *Ivoirité* ("Ivorianness" or "being Ivorian") escalated in 2002, causing the country to split into the rebel-held north and the government-controlled south. French troops of Operation *Licorne*, under the aegis of a peacekeeping mission called United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), were, until very recently, providing the "buffer" or "confidence zone" that was keeping the warring parties apart.

This article evaluates France's conflict resolution strategy towards the Ivorian crisis by taking into account Côte d'Ivoire's internal dynamics and a wider international context over the last two decades. It addresses the following questions. Should we really view Côte d'Ivoire as France's Iraq, as some contend?¹ Or could we, in fact, state that, given the circumstances, France responded appropriately to the conflict? What role did France play in this "hybrid" peacekeeping operation, involving national, regional and international actors? And what are the ethical implications of France's intervention in what was once perceived as a favored colony and its strongest ally in sub-Saharan Africa?

The article is divided into three parts; the first is a brief presentation of the main causes of the Ivorian crisis, which is then followed by an analysis of the conflict resolution strategy that

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national, regional and international actors formulated. An attempt is made to determine the reasons behind France's choice for the apparently neutral position of its interposition operation. Through an analysis of the weaknesses and strengths of the other two actors, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Mission in Côte d'Ivoire (ECOMICI) and the UNOCI, and their interaction with the French military operation, *Licorne*, the role of France in shaping the overall conflict resolution strategy is made clearer. In the final part of the article, some of the ethical issues associated with the military implications of a former colonial power's involvement in its African colony are addressed. Based on this discussion, an assessment is made of the success of France's response to the Ivorian crisis. My conclusions are formulated primarily with help of extensive secondary literature and primary sources such as peace accords, UN resolutions, newspaper articles and reports. These findings are complemented by qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews with French diplomats conducted during my fieldwork in France and Côte d'Ivoire in late 2007 and early 2008. Interviews serve mainly to support or further clarify data obtained from other sources.

Background: Reasons for the Ivorian Crisis

The Ivorian crisis is often interpreted in simplified terms, as a cultural clash between the Muslim north and the Christian south, between ethnic groups of the savannah and those of the forest zone. This reductionist approach, which is mostly propagated by politicians and the media, relies squarely on the "primordialist assumption", which understands ethnicity as an innate, objectively given and immutable substance of human identity, which, when confronted with a different cultural conceptions, can lead to confrontation.²

A more flexible and broader "instrumentalist" approach to ethnicity, which views it above all as an ambiguous ideological concept, susceptible to different meanings and instrumental usage in struggles for power, is far more promising. Namely, the Ivorian crisis is a truly multi-layered conflict where ethnicity appears to become a relevant distinguishing factor only after being tightly related to other issues such as economic crisis, economic and political discrimination, land, immigration policy, succession struggle and, above all, the concepts of autochthony and citizenship. All these factors and concepts contribute to one of the most evasive and instrumentally abused terms in recent Ivorian history, *Ivoirité*, which was coined but never fully explained by the former president Henri Konan Bédié, and which was open to the most xenophobic interpretations. While these factors are interwoven to such an extent that it is impossible to disentangle them and assess their individual contribution to the Ivorian crisis, I will, for the sake of intelligibility, examine them separately.

First, there is the succession problem, which arose in 1993 with the death of the charismatic president Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who had led the country for almost four decades. Houphouët-Boigny's opportunistic constitutional revision provided that, in the case of his death, his post would be filled by the National Assembly's speaker, Henri Konan Bédié, until the end of the presidential term. Bédié's incompetence and his inability to understand that the times had changed with the opening up of the political process through democratization and multi-partyism, encouraged his main competitors, especially the leader of the opposition FPI

(*Front Populaire Ivoirien*), Laurent Gbagbo, and a reformist within the governing PDCI (*Parti démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire*), Alassane Ouattara, to challenge his authority.³

Bédié tried to legitimize his presidential position and to eliminate his main competitors by coining the contentious ideological term *Ivoirité*, which confined the status of "true Ivorians", and thus "natural" contenders for power, to the socio-cultural universe of the Akan ethnic group (more precisely, the Baoulé), with which Houphouët-Boigny, Bédié himself and the majority of the old PDCI elite identified.

General Gueï, who, to the general surprise and relief of most Ivorians, suddenly usurped power by military coup in 1999, brought about, after a very brief reconciliation strategy, a drastic change to the conceptualization of *Ivoirité*. As the first non-Baoulé leader, he defined it as differentiating southern, non-Dioula from northern Dioula people, and thereby transformed an ethnic divide into a regional one.⁴

This regional divide has been exacerbated by the xenophobic politics of the current president, Laurent Gbagbo, himself a member of a minor ethnic group, the Bété, from the southwest. Under his regime, the concept of "foreigner" gradually incorporated not only true economic immigrants from other countries like Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea, but also second-generation immigrants who had actually been born in Côte d'Ivoire and whose foreign roots could only be detected by the sound of their patronymic, their Muslim religion, and the scarring on their faces. What was more, not even the internal migrants, such as Muslims from the northern regions of Côte d'Ivoire and the mostly Christian Baoulé from the southeast who had moved to the southwest to work on the coffee and cocoa plantations, could escape the stigma of "foreigner."⁵

Initially, the introduction of the *Ivoirité* discourse concerned eligibility for the presidency. Bédié's and Gueï's constitutional revisions successfully barred Alassane Ouattara, now the leader of the reformist splinter party the RDR (*Rassemblement des Républicains*), from the 1995 and 2000 presidential elections, because of his alleged Burkinabé origin. The nationality problem, however, has unfortunately not been restricted to the presidential domain and the struggle for leadership. It has penetrated every aspect of Ivorian society, through the adoption of stricter rules for the acquisition of identity cards and resident cards for immigrants, the latter having been introduced in 1990 by, ironically, the then prime minister Alassane Ouattara.⁶ These measures were intended to address the immigration problem, which had become especially burdensome due to persistent economic crisis. According to some Ivorians, the proportion of immigrants, estimated to be around 26 percent, surpassed the immigration tolerance threshold decisively.⁷

The immigration flows have their roots in the colonial period, when the French used Mali (formerly French Sudan) and Burkina Faso (former Upper Volta) as a reservoir of labor for the newly established Ivorian cocoa and coffee plantations in the south, as well as for the forest exploitation and the construction of the railway. It was a deliberate, well-administered, and often extremely brutal forced displacement of hundreds of thousand of northern people to the Ivorian south. Facilitating this was the integration of the major part of Burkina Faso, named Haute Côte, into the Ivorian territory between 1933 and 1947. This colonial practice was justified by the very low population density of Côte d'Ivoire. The inhabitants, only 1,900,000 in 1936,

were supposedly unable to cope with the freshly introduced capitalist system and France's increasing needs for primary commodities.⁸

Houphouët-Boigny's project of rapid economic development, a carbon copy of the colonial cash crop expansionism, continued to rely on the same migration practices after independence in 1960. This time, however, people came freely, lured by better job opportunities and higher Ivorian living standards. They were offered land in exchange for working in the plantations that propelled Côte d'Ivoire down its prosperous path.⁹ Côte d'Ivoire became the biggest cocoa producer, accounting 40 percent of world production, a proportion that has only deteriorated slightly due to the civil war in 2002 and the consequent split of the country.¹⁰

Houphouët-Boigny found a strong political support base among immigrants, especially during the first democratic elections in 1990. The opposition even accused him of offering generous numbers of nationality cards in exchange for their vote. His personalized vision of an African melting pot was never fully achieved, nor open-heartedly accepted by the Ivorian population. As Dembélé views it, Côte d'Ivoire saw a mere cohabitation of different communities/ethnic groups on Ivorian soil, each community occupying its specific "socio-ecological niche."¹¹ Moreover, the division of labor and of economic and political status most often went along the same community lines, which further rigidified the socio-economic system and slowed down the integration process.¹²

Although Houphouët-Boigny tried to decrease inter-ethnic tensions by including representatives of each ethnic group in the political elite, the privileging of Akan/Baoulé, also known as *Baoulisation*, and the neglect of the whole northern region, were undeniable realities. The failure of the melting pot project may explain why Houphouët-Boigny's proposition of double nationality for people within the Conseil de l'Entente (encompassing Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin and Togo) was rejected by the population and the National Assembly.¹³

Fear of immigrants' usurpation of political and economic power was not a new problem in Côte d'Ivoire, however, as the massive exodus of Dahomeans (the old name for residents of Benin) in 1958 and of Ghanaians in 1993 attest.¹⁴ Dahomeans, for example, were targeted by the newly established Ivorian intellectual elite, which was tempted by the lucrative positions in the colonial administration that had until then been mostly occupied by the former group.¹⁵ In each case, the colonial or post-colonial practice of linking a specific ethnic group to a given political and socio-economic space by excluding other communities was the real trigger of dissent and resentment. The divide and rule process tragically substantiated the ethnic divides that caused the implosion of nationality.

Many view the Ivorian crisis as the legacy of Houphouët-Boigny's autocratic regime, a civil dictatorship that dangerously undermined a truly democratic debate wherein people could have expressed their values and their vision of the national question and which might have led eventually to a true social contract.¹⁶ However, the opening up of the democratic process, the appearance of opposition newspapers and the formation of various groups within civil society occurred only in the 1990s.¹⁷

The radicalization of the immigration question after Houphouët-Boigny's death should thus not be viewed exclusively as the instrumentalization of ethnic and nationality concepts by new political elites struggling for power within the freshly established multiparty system. We

can, in fact, speak of a collective responsibility, where radicalization worked in both directions and where politicians built their political agenda and support by addressing the extant fears and resentments of the population. As Langer puts it, "the simultaneous presence of severe political horizontal inequalities at the elite level and socio-economic horizontal inequalities at the mass level forms an extremely explosive socio-political situation."¹⁸

The persistent economic crisis, caused by a sharp drop in the international prices for primary commodities and the corruption of the patrimonialist system of the PDCI one-party regime, delivered a decisive blow to the national cohesiveness. Ivorian indebtedness prompted the Bretton Woods institutions to impose structural adjustment programs, which introduced a savage austerity policy in exchange for financial assistance. These policies had detrimental effects on the functioning of the state and on the quality of life of the majority of people.¹⁹ Limited access to resources such as land and employment further aggravated conflict, in urban as well as in rural areas, between the supposed indigenous population and African economic immigrants.

Houphouët-Boigny's development project, relying on the philosophy that "the land belongs to whoever wants to cultivate it," caused the distribution of the fertile land in the southwest for the cultivation of coffee and cocoa to the immigrant workers from the northern neighboring countries as well as from the north and southeast Ivorian regions. This meant that the autochthonous population from the southwest, namely the Krou and Bété ethnic groups, gradually became minorities in their home region. Economic recession, combined with population growth, pushed some of the autochthonous unemployed urban youth into this rural area, where they claimed their rights to the land. These disputes over land, which was by that time seriously exhausted due to continuous intensive cultivation, added to the already present clashes between the "traditional" villagers and the more recent economic immigrants. The reform of the rural land tenure law in 1998, which tried to address the tensions between locals and newcomers by redistributing land according to criteria of autochthony, had disastrous effects in practice, especially in the coffee and cocoa regions where foreigners were in the majority.²⁰

Laurent Gbagbo found especially loyal supporters for his xenophobic policies among the disgruntled unemployed urban youth from the south.²¹ They organized raids and destroyed Dioula shops and shanties.²² As the chief victims in the socio-economic crisis, youths used disputes over citizenship and national belonging as an opportunity to renegotiate their own position.²³ Once the decisive pressure group for social change and democratic reforms, students now often represent politically instrumentalized and regressive forces, organizing themselves in militia groups, such as the "young patriots", which have been responsible for many attacks on civilians and Ouattara's supporters.²⁴ Alassane Ouattara, for his part, acquired equally powerful support groups among the northern population, as well as among economic immigrants and their descendents, who became ever more reluctant to contribute to the economic prosperity of the country that was increasingly treating them as second-class citizens.

To complicate things even more, there are indications of a regional dimension to the Ivorian crisis. The Burkina Faso government is suspected of protecting the instigators of the failed military coup in 2002 and of actively supporting the rebels.²⁵ The Compaoré regime has, however, retroactively faced the destabilizing pressure of Burkinabé immigrants returning from

Côte d'Ivoire.²⁶ Meanwhile, the Liberian civil war produced a spillover effect on Côte d'Ivoire. Charles Taylor contributed greatly to the creation, arming and military training of the members of the two rebel groups from the southwest, the MJP (*Mouvement pour la justice et la paix*) and the MPIGO (*Mouvement patriotique ivoirien du Grand Ouest*), which emerged after the military coup on 19 September 2002 that tried to overthrow Gbagbo. Gbagbo himself financed and armed some of the Liberian soldiers to protect his regime.²⁷

Civil War and the Conflict Resolution Strategy for Côte d'Ivoire

Internal tensions reached their peak on 19 September 2002 when a straightforward mutiny on the previous day, involving simultaneous attacks in Abidjan, Bouaké and Korhogo and which was allegedly prepared by a group of pro-Gueï soldiers who had been purged from the National Army by the Gbagbo government, quickly escalated into a failed military coup.²⁸ The structure, size, organization and source of armaments of the rebel group remain unknown to the present day. What is even more intriguing is that its demands changed drastically within few days of the military coup. While at the outset the mutineers simply requested financial compensation and re-integration in the army, the group very soon acquired a more visibly political orientation: it renamed itself *Forces nouvelles* (New Forces) and put the following goals on its agenda: Gbagbo's resignation, organization of free and fair elections, and the end of the discriminatory politics based on the concept of *Ivoirité*.²⁹ Côte d'Ivoire sank into the violence of its first civil war, and the time had come for the international community to respond.

Conflict resolution strategy for Côte d'Ivoire has progressively incorporated national, regional and international actors, and thus provides one of the most recent examples of "hybrid operations" in Africa.³⁰

France's Intervention

France was the first to intervene, only three days after the rebels' failed military coup. Its military intervention, however, was initially confined to the protection and evacuation of French expatriates and civilians of other nationalities who wanted to escape the civil war. France legitimized its action in terms of its duty to protect French citizens on the territory of another country when their lives are threatened and the host country is incapable of, or unwilling to, provide for their security.³¹ Except for the expatriates of the United States, who were evacuated with help of American special troops, French troops rescued other civilians on the demand of their respective governments.³²

At the beginning of October 2002, Gbagbo requested that France help governmental forces to suppress the rebel insurgency, appealing to the many defense accords that have linked the two countries since Côte d'Ivoire's independence in 1960. Laurent Gbagbo insisted on the involvement of external actors in this rebel insurgence, especially Burkinabé president Blaise Compaoré, former Liberian president Charles Taylor, and Libyan leader Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi. According to bilateral defense accords, France was supposed to intervene in the case of an external threat to the sovereignty of Côte d'Ivoire.³³

It is true that, as in the case of the Sierra Leonean Revolutionary United Front (RUF), many of the rebel fighters were foreigners, including, in the southwest of the country, many Liberian mercenaries. After the end of the Liberian civil war, they had crossed the border with Côte d'Ivoire to continue fighting and pillaging the villages. Most of the fighters, however, came from the northern part of Côte d'Ivoire and were external and internal immigrants who were discriminated against by the concept of Ivoirité.³⁴

The vagueness of the stated conditions in defense accords, as well as the confidential status of many of them, offered France room to interpret events in a way most convenient to it.³⁵ Insistence on the interpretation of the war as an internal conflict enabled France to restrict the military action to a mere interposition of its troops between the warring parties in the newly formed "buffer" or "confidence" zone, and to the protection of civilians.³⁶ France thus clearly indicated its preference for maintaining the status of a peacekeeping force, as opposed to giving active military support to either party involved in the dispute, a decision that enraged Laurent Gbagbo as well as the rebels.

There are many reasons that could have influenced France to take this position. Its reluctance to get involved in the Ivorian crisis should partly be understood within the historical context of the widespread criticism of France's past support of the dictatorial Mobutu regime in Zaire and its acceptance of highly questionable electoral processes in Chad, Niger and Togo.³⁷ The peak of this discreditable French African policy was reached with the implication of French troops in the Rwandan genocide in 1994.³⁸ The domestic and international community accused France of providing military and logistical support to Hutu-dominated Habyarimana government in its fight against the Tutsi-controlled, pro-American Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in the run-up to the genocide. In addition, the French military *Opération Turquoise* helped governmental forces, at that time already responsible for the genocide of some 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus, to avoid persecution by enabling them to escape across the border to Eastern Congo through the "humanitarian" safe zone formed by French troops.³⁹ From that time onward, France became increasingly reluctant to intervene overtly in any conflict on the African continent that could attract international and national indignation.

France's stagnating economy at the time and its consequently shrunken aid and military budgets doubtless also help explain its disengagement in African policy, including its approach to military interventionism.⁴⁰ Integration into the European Union, closer co-operation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and increasing involvement in other multilateral institutions, have impeded France from making unilateral and often opaque decisions in its foreign policy.⁴¹ The criteria of European monetary union (EMU) further constrained France by requiring it to keep its public expenditure low and more transparent, which substantially reduced its capacity to maintain clientelistic relationships with African countries.

The African continent itself underwent many changes during the 1990s. Economic globalization, large debts incurred by most African countries, and political instability provoked by the democratization process and multi-partyism, substantially marginalized the African continent in the international system and consequently made it less attractive in political or economic terms. Both involvement in Africa's escalating conflicts and investment in business appeared to be more risky than ever before and contained no strategic gains.⁴²

France did not have any desire to overtly support the rebels in Côte d'Ivoire, since the United Nations and the African Union had both condemned the attempted military coup as an unacceptable means for those involved to achieve their goals.⁴³ On the other hand, France could not and did not want to support Laurent Gbagbo, because of his contentious ascension to power in 2000 amidst what he himself described as "calamitous conditions," the exacerbation of his xenophobic politics of Ivoirité after the elections, and the violation of the human rights by his militia groups.

France's neutral position and its relatively slow response to the Ivorian crisis -- which had escalated dangerously since the military coup in 1999, through the contentious 2000 presidential election to the civil war in 2002 -- could be interpreted also in the light of the extreme opportunism of French politics towards Côte d'Ivoire, which were enabled by the strong colonial links tying the two countries together. France has maintained strong relationships with all Ivorian political figures, which means that it can easily adapt its realist politics to practically any change of situation at the top level of the Ivorian ruling elite, without losing much of its influence.⁴⁴ Laurent Gbagbo, both initially and during the cohabitation period, found supporters among members of the French Socialist Party, which may explain France's tardy condemnation of the illegitimacy of the 2000 presidential election, whereas European Union, United States and many African countries all called for a rerun early on.⁴⁵ By contrast, Alassane Ouattara, whose strong American links are a myth, has been close to the new generation of the neo-liberal French politicians, including the current French president, Nicolas Sarkozy. Simple post-colonial inertia was, to begin with, sufficient to maintain control of the situation.⁴⁶

The Rwandan genocide, however, brought to global public awareness another important message: that of the failure of the regional and international organizations to prevent one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes of the last two decades, and of the urgent need for quicker responses to xenophobic discourses in multi-ethnic African countries. The war in Liberia, on the other hand, exemplified the spillover effect of the internal conflict that could suddenly regionalize. The Ivorian crisis doubtlessly produced fears of genocide and regionalization of the conflict. France, the former colonial power in Côte d'Ivoire, and which maintained a military base on Ivorian territory, seemed to be more adept at responding quickly and eventually preventing a second Rwanda.

It is interesting to note, however, that a more recent report produced in June 2004 by the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) and the Centre for International Peace Operations (ZIF) states that "with hardly any of the warring groups having an ideological determination to carry out ethnic cleansing, the threat of genocide on the scale of Rwanda, which has been persistently evoked recently, is virtually non-existent".⁴⁷ Additionally, unlike Liberia and Sierra Leone, which were virtually bankrupt by the time their insurgencies started, Côte d'Ivoire was still a relatively well-functioning state, with established institutions and a growing middle class.⁴⁸

While French military officers generally agree with this evaluation, they contend, however, that their interposition between the warring parties substantially diminished the number of potential victims and the further deterioration of the situation. As Captain Prazuck explains: "The more you intervene belatedly, the more things become difficult, and the more difficult it is to extinguish the fire."⁴⁹ One should not forget the extreme geo-strategic importance of Côte

d'Ivoire: it is the economic engine of Francophone West Africa and an immigration magnet for less developed hinterland countries. Its descent into chaos would thus have had a serious impact on the whole West African region and perhaps even beyond. The goal of the French interposition was to exercise pressure on the Ivorian political elite and thus to persuade them come to the negotiation table and finally address the pernicious Ivoirité issue that was tearing the country apart.⁵⁰ Thus, even the most virulent critics of France's opportunistic and corrupted African policy did not protest, at least not initially, against the intervention of French troops. The international arena demanded action in the name of humanity, and France could step in without being blamed for the neo-colonial aspects of its protection of French expatriates or the fact that, because of the Franco-Ivorian defense accords, the National Army of Côte d'Ivoire (FANCI) was reduced to a simple gendarmarie unable to defend its own territory.⁵¹

ECOWAS Operation ECOMICI

The second actor to intervene in the conflict resolution in Côte d'Ivoire was the mission organized by ECOWAS. ECOWAS responded very quickly on the diplomatic level. It organized an Extraordinary Summit in Accra on 29 September 2002 to discuss the recent events in Côte d'Ivoire, on which occasion a Contact Group facilitating the dialogue between the rebel parties was created. With the help of France, it finally succeeded in obtaining a cease-fire accord, signed by representatives of the government and the rebels on 17 October 2002. However, the deployment of its troops for monitoring adherence to the cease-fire agreement proved to be more problematic.⁵² The authorized strength of the ECOWAS Mission in Côte d'Ivoire (ECOMICI) of 2,386 men from Benin, Ghana, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo, which should have been deployed as of 31 December 2002, was too small to execute the agreed mission, and was diminished in number since many countries, for various reasons, did not contribute soldiers after all. As a matter of fact, by February 2003, only some 500 ECOWAS troops were deployed on Ivorian soil, at a time when the French force Licorne numbered already more than 3,000 men.⁵³

Apart from the limited strength of its troops, ECOMICI also struggled with several other problems, such as the delayed setting up of the basic force headquarters, lack of coordination and organizational skills, a too small professional staff, and overall deficiencies of equipment, logistics support and funding. In spite of the many problems that ECOMICI faced, however, this military intervention included also many positive factors. This was especially true when compared to the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in the Liberian civil war, which was described by Lansana Gberie as an "ill-conceived and regionally divisive intervention exercise by autocratic leaders with disastrous consequences."⁵⁴ In Côte d'Ivoire, by contrast, a total consensus existed between all ECOWAS heads of state regarding the intervention: there was no division between Anglophone states supporting one party and the Francophone states supporting the other party, which had been the case in Liberia. ECOMICI enjoyed credibility as a relevant peace-broker, and its troops received prior training in peace support training centers and other military schools, which contributed substantially to their discipline.⁵⁵ French presence, however, was still essential to the implementation of the mission, especially in the

most volatile areas in the southwest. The French were also the ECOMICI's main backers for the human, financial and other resources.⁵⁶

Linás-Marcoussis Accords

In January 2003, French President Jacques Chirac organized roundtable talks in France at which all the Ivorian political forces involved in the conflict were gathered in order to discuss possible solutions to the persistent crisis. The parties agreed, by signing the Linás-Marcoussis accords, to preserve the integrity of Ivorian territory and to set up a transitional Government of National Reconciliation composed of representatives of all the parties participating in the roundtable and led by a consensus prime minister. The main role of this interim government was to organize the free and fair elections after the identification and DDR (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration) processes.⁵⁷

Most importantly, the Linás-Marcoussis accords removed the contentious Article 35 of the Constitution on the basis of which Alassane Ouattara had been barred from two presidential elections. They formally abolished the village committees responsible for issuing statements of origin. Formerly, under the Gbagbo regime, anyone who wanted an identity document had to prove his/her nationality by obtaining a statement of origin issued by a committee from their village of origin.⁵⁸ This enabled village chiefs and local notables in the village committees to acquire disproportionate power and often to abuse it.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, as Banégas explains, the "aliens hearings" (*audiences foraines*) that were introduced in May 2006 as a way to identify people who do not have identity cards but wanted to participate in the elections gave local notables the same authority to decide whether an applicant was indeed born in a given locality. These "aliens hearings" were interrupted many times due to violent eruptions of militia groups, who were protesting against the identification of immigrants, and only resumed at the end of 2007.

Despite more or less justified criticisms of the Linás-Marcoussis accords, especially on the part of Gbagbo's supporters who complained about the neo-colonial attitude of the French diplomats and the undermining of the legitimate Ivorian government, they were still a very important step in the peace process. As a French diplomat contends, they address the main cause of the Ivorian conflict, the Ivoirité discourse, and attempt to find remedies for it.⁶⁰

The Linás-Marcoussis accords constituted, until the Ouagadougou accord signed on 4 March 2007, the foundation of the Ivorian peace process, and later accords as well as the 2004 Accra Accord as well as UN resolutions are based on it. On 4 February 2003, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1464, which a posteriori legitimized the Linás-Marcoussis accords as well as the Licorne and ECOMICI interventions.⁶¹

UN Interventions MINUCI and UNOCI

The United Nations was the last to intervene. On 13 May 2003, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1479, establishing an essentially political United Nations Mission in Côte d'Ivoire (MINUCI), whose mandate was to observe and facilitate the implementation of the Linás-Marcoussis accords with the military help of Licorne and ECOMICI.⁶² France called for a

more concrete international intervention, but was initially opposed by the United States, which considered the bigger peacekeeping operation to be unnecessary and costly.⁶³ The UN Security Council authorized the full peacekeeping operation, including nearly 7,000 UN personnel, almost a year later, on 27 February 2004. Resolution 1528 established the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) for an initial period of 12 months (further resolutions prolonged its mission), starting on 4 April 2004, on which date the mandate of MINUCI ended.⁶⁴ The ECOMICI and MINUCI forces were absorbed into the UNOCI forces, while the Licorne operation co-operates with it. The UNOCI mission was to monitor the application of the cease-fire agreements and the implementation of Linas-Marcoussis accords, to help the transitional government to execute the DDR program, to control the embargo on arms, and to support the organization of elections.⁶⁵

The Licorne mission was to contribute to the general security and protection of civilians and to support UNOCI forces in executing its mission. 26 French officers of UNOCI filled the role of liaison officers.⁶⁶ UNOCI and Licorne forces thus operated together with separate but permanently liaised command and control structures. Most importantly, Licorne provided a guaranteed Rapid Reaction Force for the international peacekeeping mission. According to Captain Prazuck, the reason for this arrangement is to be found in the catastrophic UN military operation in Srebrenica in 1995, when 91 French soldiers died, allegedly due to bad UN management of the situation.⁶⁷ From then on, France has preferred to provide international peacekeeping missions with its Rapid Reaction Force. In practice, this means that French troops partially retain their autonomy in terms of decision-making, allowing them to intervene without prior UN authorization. While the general framework of the UNOCI mission was set, the individual actions within it were not really specified. This was the case with the destruction of the Ivorian National Air Force by the French Army at the explicit request of the French President Jacques Chirac. The action was a direct response to the Gbagbo regime's bombing of both the rebel positions and the French military base in November 2004. The French Army is also responsible for the disproportionate suppression of the violent protests led by "young patriots," which had been sparked by the French military action mentioned above, and involved about 60 civilian casualties.

The troop strength authorized by UN Resolution 1528 was 6,240 military personnel and 350 policemen; however, by the end of May 2004, only 3,004 were yet deployed. "About half of the troops in place were former ECOMICI contingents from Benin, Ghana, Niger, Senegal and Togo."⁶⁸ The remainder comprised Bangladeshi and Moroccan contingents, 63 officers at mission headquarters, 123 military observers and 171 members of the French engineering company. As of August 2009, UNOCI comprised about 8,385 uniformed personnel.⁶⁹

UNOCI was struggling with significant limitations at the operational level, because the logistical support system could not adapt fast enough to the growing number of UNOCI personnel.⁷⁰ This resulted in further delays. In addition, the UNOCI budget was received late. Apart from material inadequacies, the UNOCI operation was tarnished by the apparent lack of discipline of its troops. The Moroccan contingent was suspected of sexual abuse of the Ivorian women and children.⁷¹ UNOCI troops were unable to prevent Gbagbo troops from attacking the rebels due to the initial limitation of its mission to the mere observation of the implementation

of the cease-fire agreement. This provision was changed only after the attacks of November 2004.⁷²

At the summit in Addis Ababa on 6 November 2005, and on the recommendation of ECOWAS, the UN Security Council and the African Union (AU) established an International Working Group (GTI), composed of representatives of South Africa, Benin, the United States, France, Ghana, Guinea, Great Britain, Niger, Nigeria, UN, AU, ECOWAS, EU and the International Organization of Francophonie (OIF). Its mandate consisted in evaluating, controlling and following the peace process and the respect for the engagements by all the involved Ivorian parties. Here again, France played an important role by acting independently, through the UN, EU and OIF. As one French diplomat in Abidjan admits, French experts prepared all UN draft resolutions.⁷³ However, according to another French diplomat, these drafts were thoroughly discussed by other UN members, and modified appropriately.⁷⁴

Final Stage of the Ivorian Conflict Resolution Strategy: Ouagadougou Accords or the "Ivorian Solution to the Ivorian Problems"

The hostility between the Gbagbo regime and the international community intensified progressively. Laurent Gbagbo accused France and the United Nations of helping rebels to destabilize the legitimate Ivorian regime and dismantle its democratic institutions. The "young patriots" accused France of playing a dirty game of neo-colonial politics.

At the end of 2006, it became obvious that the elections could not be held, since the DDR program and the identification process were not accomplished. With Resolution 1739, the UN Security Council postponed the elections for the second and last time, prolonged the mandate of UNOCI and Licorne and accorded, under the suggestion of France, more power to the prime minister of the interim government.⁷⁵ When Laurent Gbagbo made clear that he did not intend to respect the provisions of this resolution, claiming that it violated the Ivorian Constitution and attacked the sovereignty of Côte d'Ivoire, the diplomatic crisis reached its lowest point.

To the surprise of many, things were drastically changed by Gbagbo's initiative, first presented in November 2006, of finding an "Ivorian solution to the Ivorian problems," based on a direct dialogue between himself and Guillaume Soro, the leader of the rebel New Forces. On 4 March 2007, the Ouagadougou Accord was concluded, with the aid of Blaise Compaoré, acting president of ECOWAS. A month later, Guillaume Soro finally replaced prime minister Henri Konan Banny, who had been appointed by the international community. Together with the president, he formed a new government. Apart from a schedule for the identification process, dismantling of the militia groups and the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) program, this accord also provided for the suppression of the confidence zone and the progressive replacement of the impartial forces (UNOCI, Licorne) by mixed forces composed of rebel fighters and Ivorian National Army soldiers. The suppression of the confidence zone and the repositioning of the impartial forces at seventeen observational points began on 16 April 2007 and finished on 15 September 2007. The Licorne and UNOCI troops have been gradually reduced, but intend to stay in the country until the successful accomplishment of the presidential elections.⁷⁶

The international community, including France, has generally responded positively to Gbagbo's initiative, although many remain skeptical about Gbagbo's good intentions. The implementation of the Ouagadougou accord and its following four complementary accords are already far behind schedule. Because of the serious delays in the identification process, the disarmament of the former rebels and militias, and their reinsertion or reintegration into civilian life or the military, the elections have been repeatedly postponed. On 15 May 2009, the Ivorian government announced that it would hold the presidential election on 29 November.⁷⁷ Much depends on the good will of the Ivorian political elite.

Assessing France's Intervention and its Ethical Implications

It is therefore clear that France was an important mediator between the warring parties throughout the conflict resolution strategy and shaped the peace process significantly. Historically strong links between the two countries, as well as the superior operational skills and equipment of the French Army, which maintains a military base on Ivorian territory up to the present day, can partially explain France's significant involvement in the Ivorian crisis. There are also, however, many other reasons why this apparently unproblematic and neutral position of France could give rise to serious ethical issues that could hinder true conflict resolution in the long term.

It has to be taken into account that France has played a decisive role in defining the political, economic and social structure of Côte d'Ivoire since the beginning of the twentieth century. "The common history of the people of Côte d'Ivoire as a single entity only began with the arrival of Europeans" -- in particular, French colonizers.⁷⁸ The freeing up of labor and its subsequent categorization and compartmentalization, including the construction of a hierarchy of ethnic categories among the local population, has been an essential process of capitalist development and lies at the heart of the modern state.⁷⁹ French colonial agents are, thus, certainly partially responsible for instigating the present ethnic conflict.

The Houphouëtist post-colonial state merely appropriated these colonial practices and further exacerbated them through a development policy marked by extreme extroversion, based over all on close cooperation with France and an unrestricted reliance on foreign labor and investment.⁸⁰ Houphouët-Boigny's Côte d'Ivoire was the epitome of the strong Franco-African links that were enhanced after independence by the increasing number of French technical assistants offering their skills in all vital sectors, such as political counseling, administration, economic investment and education.⁸¹ The number of French technical assistants started to diminish only after the economic crisis began in the second half of the 1980s.

The constant presence of the French military force in Côte d'Ivoire, a force that was, according to bilateral defense accords, responsible for the defense of the sovereignty and integrity of the Ivorian territory, practically reduced the Ivorian military to a simple gendarmerie incapable of defending its own territory and people. Laurent Gbagbo thus relied completely on the guidance of the French government to determine the nature of the attack and, in fact, to evaluate whether such military action would be worth pursuing.

A closer examination of the French conflict resolution strategy itself reveals inconsistency in France's supposedly neutral position. After the imposition of Licorne between the warring

parties, France still provided the Ivorian National Army with logistical support and agreed to open the so-called “confidence zone.” This allowed the governmental forces to attack the rebel positions in Bouaké. After failing to conquer the town, the governmental forces withdrew and Licorne closed the passage again.⁸²

On the other hand, France legitimized rebellion by inviting its representatives to the Linas-Marcoussis roundtable, where they were offered the strategically most important ministerial positions of defense and internal affairs within the newly established interim government. It was naïve to expect that Laurent Gbagbo would humbly swallow this humiliating (for him) provision, which was probably dictated by Jacques Chirac, who could not hide his animosity towards the Ivorian president. Furthermore, the boundaries of the confidence zone itself did not reflect the actual ethnic or cultural division, since most of the so-called “foreigners” reside today in the southwest region and in Abidjan.

Laurent Gbagbo supposedly introduced an abrupt and brutal change in the close Franco-Ivorian relationship, which reached its lowest point in November 2004 when he broke the ceasefire agreement by bombing the rebel positions and the French military base. The consequent complete destruction of the Ivorian National Air Force by the French provoked violent protests by “young patriots” who attacked French expatriates and their property under the slogan of the “fight for the second independence.”⁸³ About 8,000 French expatriates left the country within days after the incident, helped by French soldiers.

This abrupt change in Franco-Ivorian relations and the fight of the Gbagbo regime against French neo-colonialism are considered to be in many ways superficial, mere rhetoric on the part of Laurent Gbagbo to gain support from the disgruntled youth seeking revolution. Namely, indications exist that France, while playing the part of a neutral interposition force, knew how to protect its economic and strategic interests. France remains the preeminent commercial partner of Côte d’Ivoire, and bilateral exchanges increased by 17.5 percent between 2005 and 2006.⁸⁴ The number of big enterprises has only slightly diminished since 2003 (from 147 to 143).⁸⁵ There are still more than 400 small- and medium-sized French enterprises (compared to around 500 before the crisis). These French enterprises still represent about 30 percent of GDP and account for 50 percent of the fiscal revenues.⁸⁶ Many French expatriates returned to Côte d’Ivoire, and most of the contracts of French firms, such as Bouygues (electricity, water), France Télécom (telecommunication) or Bolloré (transport), were renewed.⁸⁷

The involvement of the United Nations and ECOWAS, as well as the European Union and the African Union, in the conflict resolution strategy does not necessarily mean that the French influence in Côte d’Ivoire was considerably tarnished. Considering the reduced military budget of France, the multilateral peace operation actually helped France lower the costs of its military intervention, while at the same time allowing it to pursue its national interests. The hybrid operation and the close co-operation with UNOCI also offered France a suitable guise of neutrality.

I thus disagree with most interpretations which state that the French military action in Côte d’Ivoire was a complete failure.⁸⁸ Many of the analysts contend that the French management of the Ivorian crisis reflects France’s outdated and confused African policy, whose effectiveness has been further hindered by the rivalry among various interest groups within the French political elite.⁸⁹ It is certainly true that the French response to the Ivorian crisis is above all

reactive and sometimes inconsistent. However, one should not forget the extreme evasiveness of Laurent Gbagbo's politics towards France, which requires from the latter a constant reassessment of its position and the adaptation of its *realpolitik*.

Marshall-Fratani also argues that French interventionism is handicapped by its heavy post-colonial heritage, which ultimately only exacerbated the already present ultra-nationalist feelings of some Ivorians, including the "young patriots."⁹⁰ It is exactly the ambiguity of France's relationship with its former colony that offers Gbagbo a convenient excuse to attack every decision made by France or the international community that does not please him. It is, however, hard to imagine a case in which Gbagbo would not be able to employ the powerful mobilization discourse of the "fight against French neo-colonialism." Whatever France does, the fact remains that it constitutes an integral part of Ivorian history and identity. We should also keep in mind that France initially supported Gbagbo, despite the problematic elections and criticism from the European Union.

The only possible alternative to French interventionism would have been one involving the African states in a more decisive role in the conflict resolution strategy, which, unfortunately, did not happen. As the recent example of Zimbabwe's presidential elections and ongoing political crisis illustrate, African presidents remain all too lenient when it comes to criticizing one of their counterparts, especially if the person in question enjoys the status of being an old anti-colonial fighter, and regardless of how their actual style of rule diverts from stated ideals. When the African leaders, nonetheless, adopt a more critical stance, as the Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade did in the case of Côte d'Ivoire, the attacked leader can always resort to accusations of the former colonial power's covert manipulation. The involvement of neutral and disinterested states in messy situations such as civil wars is problematic for another reason. The realist perception of the nation states as actors pursuing their national interests within the anarchical international system is still well entrenched within the minds of the politicians. It is, therefore, almost impossible to expect a state to contribute its material and human resources solely on humanitarian grounds.

Furthermore, it is not at all clear that the French intervention aggravated the situation, as Marshall-Fratani contends.⁹¹ France succeeded in preventing potential massive killing and further institutional disintegration. The prolonged situation created by the interposition forces, in which there was neither peace nor war, doubtless exacerbated the economic crisis, which subsequently affected Ivorian social wellbeing. Nevertheless, military coups or civil wars almost certainly provoke a more acute institutional degradation than situations in which the opposite parties are still willing to pursue their talks.

Comi Toulabor insists that with continuous external interventionism, African states will never learn how to solve their problems on their own. He gives the example of France, whose history was equally made through bloodshed and wars.⁹² This argument reflects Mohammed Ayoob's defense of non-interventionism, based upon the assumption that all states share the same evolutionary path and should, therefore, be left to accomplish their own trajectory.⁹³ In this view, all states go through similar evolutionary phases, differing only in the pace at which they pass from one phase to another. This assumption is disputable, since the origins of the African states evidently differ from those of Western countries. They, moreover, are unique in regard to governance and in terms of history itself. A non-interventionist approach, on the other

hand, in practice results in a serious ethical dilemma when it comes to situations similar to those found in Rwanda or Liberia. In both cases, the international community was criticized precisely because of its lack of will to intervene and prevent the human catastrophe.

In summary, France's interventionism was not a failure. France succeeded in preventing potential massive killings and acute institutional disintegration, while at the same time protecting its economic and strategic interests under the guise of neutrality.

Conclusion

Côte d'Ivoire has been struggling with an acute political crisis for more than a decade. This truly multi-layered crisis revolves around the contentious concept of Ivoirité, initially introduced by former Ivorian president Henri Konan Bédié, which, on the basis of their not being "true Ivorians", excluded a great part of the Ivorian population from political, economic and social rights. The crisis peaked on 19 September 2002 with the failed military coup that escalated into an insurgency, the rebels claiming to be fighting against the discriminatory mechanisms of Ivoirité and the illegitimate Gbagbo government.

Despite the fears expressed by the international community about the possible repetition of the Rwandan genocide and further destabilization of the West African region, it was France, the Ivorian former colonial power, which, although reluctantly, intervened first. By the interposition of its military troops between the warring parties and the creation of the buffer zone, it actually froze the situation and opened the space for negotiation.

The regional (ECOWAS) and international (UN) actors were, apart from the delayed deployment of their troops, struggling with a number of other problems, especially logistic and financial inadequacies. French troops seem to be the best prepared for the conflict resolution and, up to now, have played a decisive supportive role to UNOCI troops. French troops have been the best equipped, have had access to good financial and logistic support, and have been quick to react. In addition, despite the recent discussions about the actual possibility of the repetition of Rwandan genocide in Côte d'Ivoire, it can at least be stated that French troops substantially diminished the massive killings and contributed to the gradual stabilization of the situation. Moreover, it would be somehow unrealistic to expect that reconciliation could have been achieved within days or weeks. France has also provided the basis of the conflict resolution strategy by the organization of the roundtable which resulted in the signature of the Linas-Marcoussis Accords. Even the Ouagadougou accord respects the framework of these accords, which was a precondition for its acceptance by the UN Security Council.

Conflict resolution in Côte d'Ivoire is one of the most recent examples of "hybrid operations" in which a former colonial power plays a substantial role. The legitimacy of France's military operation lies primarily in the fact of the belated intervention by the regional and international actors and the many problems they encountered. The new strategy of "hybrid operation" actually helped France diminish the costs of its military intervention, while, at the same time, allowing it to pursue its national interests. However, reasons for the Ivorian crisis are partly rooted in the colonial past of the French management of Ivorian territory and society, which were continued after the independence by the Houphouët-Boigny regime. France is thus far from being a neutral party in the current conflict resolution strategy and may, to some

extent, hinder the true reconciliation process. As long as the regional and international institutions are not able to assume the desired leading role in the conflict resolution strategies, the former colonial powers will have to play a central role, despite all the possible suspicions and accusations of the neo-colonial practices. At the same time, it is hard to imagine how the former colonial powers could possibly escape the legacy that links them to their former colonies.

Notes

1. This is the general position defended by “young patriots”, supporters of the Gbagbo regime.
2. See Banks.
3. See Fotê; Koli.
4. Dioula is the name of a language similar to Bambara and spoken by people from the north. Dozon, pp. 51-59.
5. See Bouquet 2003.
6. Banégas 2006, p. 7.
7. See Conseil économique et social.
8. Bouquet 2005, p. 183.
9. See Amin; Bazin; Akindès 2004.
10. See Global Witness report.
11. See Dembélé.
12. Ibid.
13. Diabaté, p. 53.
14. Serhan, pp. 181-82.
15. Bouquet 2005, p. 171.
16. Gbagbo, p. 49; Diabaté, p. 50.
17. Koli, p. 96; Ségui.
18. Langer, p. 25.
19. See Akindès 2000; Campbell.
20. See Bouquet 2003; Chauveau.
21. See Konaté 2003.
22. Dioula people traditionally occupied the sphere of informal economy and small-scale trade.
23. See Marshall-Fratani 2006.
24. Konaté 2005, p. 270.
25. See Smith 2003.
26. See Banégas and Otayek.
27. See Ero and Marshall.
28. See Akindès 2004.
29. Hofnung 2005, p. 56.
30. Gberie, Ado and KAIPTC, p. 8.
31. See Balmond.

32. Interview with Captain Cristophe Prazuck, military officer working for French Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Paris, June 26, 2007. All interviews refereed in the text were tape recorded and translated from French by the author of this article.
33. See Hofnung 2005.
34. See Gberie, Ado and KAIPTC.
35. On the defense accords see Vasset.
36. Interview with a French diplomat 1 working for The French Embassy in Côte d'Ivoire, Abidjan, February 20, 2008. The diplomat wished the interview to be confidential and selectively tape recorded. The interviewees, who wished to remain anonymous are identified in the article by numbers.
37. See Marchal.
38. Gregory, p. 439; Chafer, p. 168; Hofnung 2006, p. 381.
39. See Verschave.
40. See Glaser and Smith.
41. See Bryant.
42. See Ulf and Olsen.
43. See Balmond.
44. Smith 2002, p. 324.
45. See Bouquet 2005. The cohabitation period (1997-2002) involved the rightist president Jacques Chirac and the socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin.
46. See Smith 2002.
47. Gberie, Ado and KAIPTC, p. 14.
48. Ibid., p. 15.
49. Interview with Captain Prazuck.
50. Interview with the French diplomat 1.
51. On the national armies of the former French colonies in sub-Saharan Africa see Nugent.
52. See Gberie, Ado and KAIPTC.
53. Ibid., pp. 23-24.
54. Looting was so common among the ECOMOG troops that Liberians corrupted the acronym ECOMOG to stand for "Every Car Or Moving Object Gone". See Gberie 2005.
55. Gberie, Ado and KAIPTC, p. 27.
56. Ibid., p. 24.
57. See Linas-Marcoussis Accords.
58. Ibid.
59. Banégas 2006, p. 8.
60. Interview with the French diplomat 1.
61. See UN Security Council resolution 1464.
62. See UN Security Council resolution 1479.
63. Balmond, p. 94.
64. See UN Security Council resolution 1528.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Interview with Captain Prazuck.

68. Gberie, Ado and KAIPTC, p. 30.
69. See UNOCI Website.
70. Gberie, Ado and KAIPTC, p. 31.
71. See Amnesty International. The Maghreb Arab Press recently reports, however, that some of the Ivorian girls, manipulated by a local NGO, were lying about Moroccan sexual abuses. See Maghreb Arab Press 2008. I could not find other sources approving this story.
72. Interview with the French diplomat 1.
73. Interview with a French diplomat 2 working for The French Embassy in Côte d'Ivoire, Abidjan, February 19, 2008.
74. Interview with a French diplomat 3 working for The French Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Paris, November 30, 2007.
75. See UN Security Council resolution 1739.
76. See Ouagadougou Accord.
77. See IRIN.
78. Gonnin, p. 163.
79. See Marshall-Fratani 2006.
80. See Amin; Bazin; Banégas 2006.
81. See Gbagbo; Crook.
82. See Bouquet 2005, p. 113.
83. See Konaté 2005; Banégas 2006.
84. See Economic Mission.
85. Ibid.
86. See Yves.
87. See Bouquet 2005, pp. 251-52.
88. See Médard; Smith 2003; Glaser and Smith.
89. See Hofnung 2006; Marshall-Fratani 2005; d'Ersu.
90. See Marshall-Fratani 2005.
91. Ibid.
92. Comi Toulabor is a researcher at the *Centre d'études d'Afrique noire, Institut d'études politiques*, Bordeaux. Cited in Marshall-Fratani 2005, p. 24.
93. See Ayooob.

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