**Analysts say Somalia progress might not translate to Mali**
**John Vandiver**
**Stars and Stripes**
**19 October 2012**

STUTTGART, Germany — While the U.S. is hailing Somalia as a success story, an example of how concerted international efforts can rout Islamic extremists in control of much of the country, some analysts are tempering that success with caution.

The U.S.' strategy in Somalia is largely focused on training and equipping African Union forces, who have made steady gains against the militant group al-Shabaab, which has been pushed out of the capital and other major cities.

As the U.S. grapples with what to do in northern Africa and across the Sahel, where security vacuums have opened the door to al-Qaida-aligned terror organizations, Johnnie Carson, assistant secretary of state for African affairs, has suggested the recent gains in Somalia could serve as a model in volatile places like Mali.

A military coup there this year introduced sufficient instability for Islamist extremists who had been fighting for control of parts of the country to make substantial gains.

"Great progress has been achieved in Somalia," Carson said during a news conference earlier this month. "We look to try to have the same kind of both regional and international cooperation on Mali."

Some analysts say, however, that it is too early to talk of success in Somalia, and they caution that Mali faces a host of distinctive security challenges.

Talk of success underestimates the security and political challenges still present in Somalia, according to J. Peter Pham, director of the Africa program at the Atlantic Council.

"One would definitely have to acknowledge that the counterinsurgency effort by the Ugandan and Burundian troops in AMISOM [The African Union Mission in Somalia] operating in Mogadishu has been a 'success' in military terms," said Pham, author of numerous studies on Somalia and Mali. "But military success should not be equated with overall strategic success and, quite frankly, I find the rush by some senior officials to proclaim victory not only premature, but downright pathetic."

Meanwhile, in the past six months, Mali, long regarded as one of the more stable democracies in western Africa, has descended into chaos. A military coup in March has brought widespread instability, particularly in the north, where there is growing anxiety about al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and other militants using a security vacuum to assert control. In addition to terrorism worries, Mali's ungoverned spaces also serve as a key transit corridor for trafficking of illicit goods to Europe from South America.

On Oct. 12, the U.N. Security Council adopted a resolution to provide military and security planners to the Economic Community of West African States and other partners in response to a request by Mali's transitional authority. In the coming weeks, the Security Council also could endorse an international military force to restore the unity of the West African country, according to the U.N.

Could ECOWAS do for Mali what the African Union has done for Somalia?

John Campbell, a former U.S. ambassador to Nigeria and a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, said ECOWAS or an African Union-led contingent could be helpful, though the vastness of the region poses big challenges.

“It’s awful hard to suppress a group roaming around in the Sahara,” Campbell said.

Any U.S. role in the region should be restricted mainly to train- and equip-type efforts, much like the U.S. has provided to AU troops working in Somalia, Campbell said.

“There could be a support role for AFRICOM, but only if they are invited by the Mali government,” Campbell said. “We have to be extremely cautious and careful.”

Still, intervention by regional military forces in western Africa would have a hard time matching what has occurred in Somalia, where the powerful militaries of Uganda and Kenya have played such an important role, according to Pham.

“In contrast, Mali’s neighbors are, in the best of times, fragile states with extremely limited political and military capacities,” Pham said. “The best ECOWAS has come up with so far is an offer of 3,000 troops – a laughable number when the challenge is to oust Islamists from, and secure an area the size of France.”

Meanwhile, a “ramshackle Malian government” that controls the southern third of the country and the Malian military are not overly eager for outside intervention, according to Pham.

In Somalia, the weak transitional government depended on international support.

The U.S. has spent more than $340 million on training and equipping the AU’s mission in Somalia. U.S. Marine Forces Africa recently wrapped up a five month mission in Uganda, where it trained deploying troops for counterterrorism missions.

Given the security gains in Somalia, Carson says the U.S. is now looking to shift some resources as part of an effort to help build up Somalia’s own army.

“The focus should be on creating a national Somali army that will take over from AMISOM and will assume the responsibilities of providing national security and defense for the nation,” Carson said.

Pham is skeptical about Somalia’s prospects. The new government has yet to assert itself, and al-Shabaab, while weakened, could pose unforeseen security challenges, he said.

With its recent rout from the strategic coastal city of Kismayo, it appears that “Shabaab’s days as a quasi-conventional military force, occupying and, to an extent, administering territory within Somalia are over,” Pham said. “However, that is not the same thing as saying that Shabaab itself is a spent force.”

Al-Shabaab’s attempt to become a governing force in Somalia was an “overreach,” but its pan-jihadist ambitions could still be very much alive, Pham said.

“Freed of the burden of governance” and the constraints of having to accommodate less extreme allies, Shabaab’s hardliners could “evolve into a true terrorist organization and possibly pose a greater threat not just to Somalia, but to neighboring countries and possibly beyond,” Pham said.