Paris Wants to Show Strength, But Faces Geopolitical Crisis in Africa

Description

AFRICA : Last week, Ruth Maclean, writing for the New York Times, reported on how democracy is stumbling in the Former French colonies in Africa – this is just part of the story, though.

One may recall that on January 2, 2024, two weeks after the African country's coup, Paris announced it had closed down its embassy in Niger "until further notice".

The new Nigerien military leadership in fact expelled the French, after ousting and house-arresting the former leader Mohamed Bazoum (on July 26, 2023).

Five military agreements with France were revoked by the military government in August last year, and the last contingent of the 1,500 troops Paris deployed in Niger left in December.

This put an end to a decade of French anti-jihadist missions in the West African Sahel region. The French troops also left Mali and Burkina Faso, in what has been described as a "domino effect".

The Niger disaster (from a French perspective) was indeed preceded by the Mali disaster – not to mention Chad. Apart from the local coups and foreign policy shifts, there is a change in the political and emotional climate as well.

Macron, like other French leaders, might talk about a "communauté de destin" or a common destiny in Africa, especially in the so-called Franc Zone, but African leaders and public opinion are increasingly hearing "neocolonialism" instead.

French neocolonial hold over part of Africa in fact materializes in many forms, which include a military presence, but also monetary institutions. All of them are being questioned.

Take Italy's Prime Minister Giorgina Meloni spot-on comments on a 2019 video (which resurfaced in 2022), for instance. In her recorded talk, which caused quite a fuss, Meloni exposed France's neocolonial grip over 14 former colonies in West Africa and Central Africa, all of which still employ the CFA Franc, a colonial currency issued by Paris, the CFA standing for "Communauté

Financière Africaine" (French for "African Financial Community"). Her points should to be taken seriously.

To be more precise, there are two currencies both currently called "CFA Franc": one is the West African CFA franc, and the other is the Central African CFA franc. The former is used by the West African nations of Niger, Mali, Senegal, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, and Togo.

All these countries are part of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), and the West African CFA franc is actually issued by the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO), located in Dakar (Senegal).

The CFA franc notes themselves, however, since the currency's creation in 1945, have been produced by the Bank of France at Chamalières. The currency was introduced by French colonial authorities, replacing the previous French West African franc.

The Central African CFA franc in turn (whose notes are also produced by the Bank of France since colonial times) is the currency of the Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon.

This monetary situation has been the target of much African criticism and angry protests over the last years. Among other things, with both CFA currencies, the central banks of all of the African nations involved are to keep at least 50% of their foreign assets in the French Treasury, which supposedly keeps the currency stable, at the cost of limiting the economic independence of these nations.

The fixed exchange rate has affected the Central African economies mostly, due to their high levels of excess liquidity (from oil revenues) – and also the West African ones, which suffer from external shocks, according to Landry Signé, a senior fellow in the Global Economy and Development Program and the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution.

Signé argues that the CFA franc zone has brought about an intense vulnerability to such external shocks, has limited intra-regional trade in Central Africa, has narrowed the industrial base, and has made countries highly dependent on producing a limited number of primary commodities to be exported. It does sound quite colonial, doesn't it?

It is no wonder the larger Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), of which the members of UEMOA are also members, is planning to introduce its own common currency for its member by 2027

Paris is currently involved in a competition with Moscow in Africa, for providing security and counter-terrorism assistance. This can be seen in the Libya crisis too, which has been a major setback for France and a real "end of an era" development.

The problem, for Paris, is that anti-French feelings are on the rise in the African continent (from the Sahel to Central Africa and West Africa), with political repercussions, while pro-Russian feelings are far from being a new thing in the region: since the early decolonization period in the1950s, the Soviet Union supported a large part of the African independence struggles.

Macron's recent sudden "tougher" stance on Russia, which actually started to gradually take shape last year, has also a lot to do with Paris' attempt to show strength (that is, greater autonomy from Washington) and to “flex muscle”, preparing for a Trump presidency scenario.

One should not expect too much from Trump's supposed isolationism – any American president can only do so much when it comes to countering the US “double government” system.

Likewise, one should not bet on Paris' (or Berlin, for that matter) flirt with “strategic autonomy”. European powers, France included, are too entwined in NATO's structures to go too far in that regard – and Paris now faces its own geopolitical crisis in Africa and abroad.

It is quite possible Washington will feel the need to get more and more involved in Africa in any case, with Biden's redeployment of US forces in Somalia being perhaps just a warm-up – despite its failure.

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Date Created
04/04/2024