



What Sahel? Russian Troops Replace French in Niger

Description

WORLD : The arrival of Russian military instructors was preceded by a phone conversation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Abdourahmane Tchiani, the chairman of Niger's National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland, on March 26.

The two leaders discussed the situation in the Sahel region, emphasising security matters and counter-terrorism activities. The leaders agreed to intensify bilateral political dialogue and step up cooperation in a variety of areas.

“The total departure of France theoretically created a vacuum in Niger's national security and international relations order and spectrum outside the African continent.

This kind of vacuum could simply not be allowed to exist,” Akinyinka Akinyoade, political analyst and senior researcher at the African Studies Center Leiden in the Netherlands, told Sputnik.

It is unsurprising that Russia agreed to lend a helping hand to Niamey against the backdrop of Moscow's increasing influence in Sahel, according to Akinyoade.

“Russia had relatively recently been supporting the governments of Mali and Burkina Faso, in near-similar political, military and economic context,” the expert said. “Thus in the emerging situation in Niger, it was natural that Russian involvement would happen.”

Upon arrival at the Niamey airport, one Russian specialist told Sputnik that the contingent will provide training to the Niger Armed Forces and share counter-terror expertise with their Nigerien peers.

Nigerien state broadcaster RTN also reported on the possible deployment of a Russian air defense system in the country, which the local military personnel will be taught to operate. “The Russian instructors will provide high-quality training for our military personnel to effectively use this system,” stated RTN.

“What all the external players and Niger have to deal with is the entrance and role of Russia in the wider scheme of things,” Akinyoade projected.

“The difference will continue to evolve because the landlocked nature of Niger implies that it has to rely on neighboring countries as part of its food and equipment supply systems and as conduits of imports from outside Africa. The importance of Niger international partners will wax and wane in this regard.”

French and American Military Not Welcome Anymore

In the aftermath of the military takeover on July 26, 2023, which was supported by the majority of the Nigerien population, the Tchiani government demanded that the French military pull out from the region.

France colonized Niger for over 60 years until 1960, and maintained its presence in the African country long after. Paris’ counter-terrorism Operation Barkhane in the Sahel from 2014 to 2022 saw a considerable French military build in the region.

In 2022 the French military was forced to leave Mali, whose government was angry that Operation Barkhane failed to reach its objectives. Citizens of Burkina Faso and Niger also expressed their opposition to the presence of French troops.

After pulling out of those countries, France relocated part of its personnel to Niger — whose former President Mohamed Bazoum was considered a loyal ally of Paris.

Despite French President Emmanuel Macron initially resisting Niamey’s demands, French soldiers finally left Niger Republic in December 2023.

The French ambassador and diplomatic mission were expelled from Niger in September 2023 following a stand-off which saw authorities cut off the embassy’s water supply.

On March 16, the Tchiani government announced the end of the status of forces agreement between Niger and the United States. The US maintains a drone air base outside Agadez in northern Niger that was built in the late 2010s.

The Pentagon also has three similar drone bases in Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Benin. The Biden administration announced in March that it held consultations with Niamey considering the fate of its base.

Sahel Picking Russia

“All former colonies have special connection to France in terms of the armed forces structure, regulations, and tactics,” Sergey Eledinov, a Russian expert on African security issues and founder of Convoy Africa, told Sputnik.

“But the question is which country is ready to extend a hand of help and offer friendship. Judging from the situation on the ground France’s assistance turned out to be a total profanation.

After the failure of the French, the US has yet to develop its Africa strategy. That leaves Russia, Türkiye, and China as [Sahel's natural allies].”

According to the Russian expert, Niger’s message to Paris and Washington was clear: “Either we will cooperate on some kind of understandable, mutually beneficial basis, or you are simply not welcome here anymore.”

Eledinov, a retired Russian military officer who participated in several peacekeeping operations, explained that while France, the US and Russia have interests in the Sahel region, it is African countries who have the final word.

Some Sahel countries have chosen Russia as an ally because it can provide assistance in a variety of fields, apart from security and military-technical cooperation.

Food, Oil and Uranium

“Niger lies in a geographical zone where climate change has exacerbated food security, thus it relies on imports in many areas of food sourcing. Recently it was in the news that Russia airlifted wheat to the country,” Akinyoade said.

Between February 2022 and March 2023, Russia supplied roughly 12 million tons of grain to African countries — despite Western sanctions — as Russian President Vladimir Putin announced at the plenary session “Russia-Africa in a Multipolar World” on March 20, 2023.

Speaking to Sputnik in December 2023, Nigerien Prime Minister Ali Mahaman Lamine Zeine said that the country was interested in boosting ties with Russia in terms of trade and agriculture.

Representative of the Pan-African Party of Niger Oumarou Abdurahamane noted in his August 2023 interview with Sputnik that Niger considers Russia a reliable partner for the launch of joint projects to develop uranium and oil fields in the country.

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Date Created

04/15/2024