



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# The army's withdrawal from Niger - has France really lost its influence in Africa or has only its ego suffered?

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Ambassador Sylvain Itte's return from Niger's capital Niamey to Paris last Wednesday symbolically marked France's withdrawal from its once-colonial West African region.

However, President Emmanuel Macron's decision to withdraw French troops and the ambassador from Niger would have seemed like a final departure 50 years ago, but not today.

Today's "final" seems different and less "final" than it did in the 1950s and 1960s during the wave of West Africa's independence from French colonial rule.

In that respect, Macron's decision to withdraw French hard power from Niger was a turning moment. However, the definition of influence has changed since the West African countries celebrated the withdrawal of French forces and proclaimed their independence half a century ago.

## Is France still a global power?

The French president's decision will leave a significant mark on the sentiments of his nation and the image of France as a global power.

After the Niger coup on July 26 and the extremely hostile attitude towards the French presence, Macron gave in after a long resistance to the demands of the coup plotters.

About 1,500 French soldiers will leave Niger (the last of them by the end of the year) "peacefully" and "in an orderly manner", as the French president emphasised.

"We are ending our military cooperation with the de facto authorities of Niger because they no longer want to fight against terrorism", Macron said in a television interview last Sunday.

The alternative to this decision would be outdated and much worse for France. It would be characteristic of a past time when hard

power was the only measure of global influence.

Perhaps Macron had the option of using his troops in Niger against the coup plotters, along with allies from the ECOWAS alliance of West African states, who had already deployed troops around Niger.

A military option might have resonated with a colonial sentiment among some conservative elements of the French elite and public, but it would have been poor statesmanship. Despite what many describe as a humiliating military and diplomatic retreat, France has other ways of preserving its influence in Central and West Africa.

## The withdrawal was expected

During a trip to 4 West African nations last February (Gabon, Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Republic of Congo), Macron declared the shift from the long-term "Francafrique" strategy.

The primary objective of that French shift was the reduction of its military presence in Africa, but, in Niger, where a coup occurred shortly after Mali and Burkina Faso, it was interpreted as a sign of its weakness.

Paris was forced to depart part of the region fast as a result of a military coup in Niger, as well as earlier ones in Burkina Faso and Mali, even though Macron had intended for the future military presence to serve only as consultative, for the purpose of assisting and training domestic forces.

However, the scenario from Niger resembles the crossroads in Afghanistan, where the US found itself at the time of its withdrawal in August 2021.

Macron's words that French soldiers will withdraw from Niger "in an orderly manner" should dispel anxiety among the domestic public about a repeat of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan.

However, France is on the right track if it uses this unpleasant episode (similar to the American one in Afghanistan 2 years ago) to adopt the US policy post-withdrawal: to continue to closely monitor and even intervene in the country from which it had withdrawn, if the fight against terrorism required it.

A year after withdrawing from Afghanistan, the US military killed Ayman al-Zawahiri, one of the leaders of Al Qaeda, in Kabul using a drone.

## Relying on the alliance with the US

French troops are leaving Niger, but about 1000 American soldiers, whose principal concern is gathering intelligence on the movements of extremists and people smugglers, will remain there (for now).

Paris won't be without significant intelligence about its considerable security risks even after its forces leave Niger, as Niger is one of the principal African hubs for the transit of migrants to Western Europe, particularly France.

However, this will force France into even more intensive cooperation with the US, which will also require the adjustment of Emmanuel Macron's policy towards the US, given his previous occasional slipping away from the alliance, first regarding Russia, and then China.

At the same time, when President Macron communicated unpleasant information about the military and diplomatic withdrawal from Niger to his public, US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin was on an important African tour.

He was in Nairobi as one of the points of his tour, and he announced that in the case of Niger, "they have not made any significant changes to their forces' posture".

Paris could therefore preserve its security influence in the Sahel region, even when it withdraws its troops, but in a new model of a

different and more intensive cooperation with allies, above all the US.

## France's interests are not threatened

The French ambassador has left Niger, and the soldiers will also withdraw, but French business remains in the country. The leader of France's economic presence in Niger, the uranium mining company Orano, has no plans to leave.

"We believe that we still have a future in Niger, and the feedback we have received is rather positive", said Xavier Saint Martin Tillet, the head of Orano's mining business unit, last week.

The Niger episode, after similar ones in Mali and Burkina Faso, hurt the feelings of the French about their country being a global power.

But their economic and security interests, for which they were primarily physically present in the rebel African states, do not necessarily have to be disregarded.

This will depend on the ability of French politics to adapt to models of influence of the 21st century and, above all, to a stronger connection with allies.