Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Will the US remain without a military presence in the Sahel after Niger cancelled the agreement?

The American military presence in the Sahel region has been called into question following the Niger junta's decision to terminate the agreement with the US and cancel the hospitality to its troops in the country.

US facilities and personnel in Niger are surrounded by intolerance, possibly open risk, given the anti-Western orientation of the coup plotters, who have already forced France to withdraw its troops.

The recent high-level US military-diplomatic mission in Niger's capital, Niamey, did not produce results. The talks seem to have further strengthened the junta's intent to expel the Americans.

There are still 648 US military personnel in the country, according to a White House report to the US Congress last December, even though the coup government in Niger still talks about 1,000 Americans.

After the coup last July and the tensions that arose, most American troops were concentrated in the air base near Agadez, nearly a thousand kilometres from the capital, where part of the American contingent remained.

"In many of these locations, the security environment is such that United States military personnel may be required to defend themselves against threats or attacks," stated President Joe Biden's last December report to Congress on current US military operations globally.

Could Niger soon become a place where the qualification from the Biden report can be applied?

The collapse of diplomatic attempts

Judging by the collapse of the previous diplomatic talks with junta representatives in Niger, this is quite possible.

The US mission in mid-March, which included Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee and the head of the US Africa Command, General Michael Langley, was unsuccessful, so the junta announced that it was withdrawing from the agreement with the US concluded 12 years ago.

Even though the Pentagon later stated that "these are ongoing discussions", the behaviour and attitudes of the junta in Niamey indicate that things are getting closer to an ultimatum.

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"The American bases and civilian personnel cannot stay on Nigerien soil any longer," a representative of the junta told AP.

The putschists say that they do not need the US mission in Niger because, so far, it has not successfully carried out its mission of suppressing terrorism in the Sahel region. However, they were additionally irritated by the complaints of US diplomats about the contacts and cooperation they have with Russia and Iran.

This is the terrain where the actual reasons for the junta's decision to suspend the agreement with the US and cancel hospitality to its troops can be apparent.

Entry of Russia

The Niger junta is firmly pro-Moscow and regards Russia as its most significant foreign ally, as seen by coup supporters cheering on the streets of Niamey during the July military coup.

Immediately after the coup, and a month before he was killed in an aeroplane explosion, the leader of the Wagner paramilitary group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, celebrated the military coup in Niger as a long-awaited liberation from the Western colonizers.

From the start, the Kremlin embraced the coup plotters as partners and held a series of high-level meetings with them. One of the most significant for Moscow's military influence in Niger took place last January, when the head of the coup government, Ali Lamine Zeine, spoke with officials in Moscow about military cooperation.

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According to the same pattern, Niger follows the example of its neighbours Mali and Burkina Faso, where military coups were also carried out, after which cooperation with Russia became very intense, especially in the military aspect.

In this respect, the cancellation of the US military presence in Niger could be a successful completion of Moscow's strategy to push Western allies out of the West African region and to take over the security levers.

A series of military coups in the Sahel in recent years was a necessary precondition for the expansion of Russia's military presence, leaving Niger the last and one of the most reliable Western pillars in the region.

The contacts of the coup plotters with the regime in Tehran are also worrying for the US. The officials expressed suspicion that they have been targeting uranium supplies to Iran, given that Niger is the world's seventh-largest producer of uranium.

Is it enough to wait for the junta to collapse?

Exempting a direct military confrontation of US troops with forces loyal to the junta in Niger, the US is left with fewer options to maintain positions in a country it has rightly regarded as crucial to the fight against Islamic extremism in the Sahel region.

The American installation in Agadez, worth $100 million, has for years been the most significant base for air surveillance operations for the area of West and North Africa, where extremist and terrorist groups have been active.

After the withdrawal of French troops from the "coup belt" in West Africa, the possible departure of American troops from Niger would cause an almost complete blackout among Western allies regarding monitoring the activities of Islamic extremists in the least stable region of Africa.

Waiting for juntas to collapse on their own and under pressure from rival factions or extremist groups can be long-lasting and a source of new radicalisation in the region

At the same time, the security vacuum is being filled rapidly and successfully, primarily by Russia, China (which has economic interests in the region), and Iran.

Even though the juntas in the region regard them as partners with whom it is easy to conclude corrupt deals, these new allies will certainly not have the suppression of extremism and terrorist groups as their priority in the countries of the Sahel.

This makes the junta even more unstable and vulnerable to new violent upheavals. However, it will not be a particular consolation for the US and its allies, whose presence in the region has been drastically reduced and is on the way

to a complete withdrawal.

Waiting for juntas to collapse on their own and under pressure from rival factions or extremist groups can be long-lasting and a source of new radicalisation in the region.

The situation the United States is in and that of its European allies, particularly France, demonstrate that the overall strategy for the region was ineffective and unconvincing. The response to the intensive infiltration of authoritarian forces was passive and late. Will the case of Niger be a strong enough warning that a change in Western approach to the sub-Saharan region is necessary?