

France's colonial legacy, US' security concerns intersect in Niger

by M.K. Bhadrakumar,* India



M. K. Bhadrakumar
(Photo ma)

The military coup in Niger is already three weeks old. The putschists are cementing their rule, having gained the upper hand in the shadow play with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) backed by ex-colonial powers ravaging that

desperately poor West African state rich in mineral wealth.

The prospects of Niger's pro-Western President **Mohamed Bazoum** being reinstated look dim. He is an ethnic Arab with a small power base in a predominantly African country, hailing from the migrant *Ouled Slimane* tribe, which has a history of being France's fifth column in Sahel region.

The ECOWAS lost the initiative once the coup leaders defied its August 6 deadline to release Bazoum and reinstate him on pain of military action.

The coup in Niger has been a humiliating setback for France too, and a terrible drama for President **Emmanuel Macron** personally as he lost his best supporter in Africa for France's neo-colonial policies. Macron egged the ECOWAS on to invade Niger and rescue Bazoum. He misread the groundswell behind the coup and gambled that Niger's military would splinter. His overreaction boomeranged as the coup leaders overnight abrogated the military pacts with France. And the latent animosity toward France surged, forcing Macron to cede the leadership to Washington.

Not only France, but western powers on the whole do not understand that the African people



Supporters of the M62 movement in Niger in a demonstration to demand the departure of foreign forces.
(Picture ma)

have a highly politicised mindset, thanks to the violent, bitterly fought national liberation movements. Unsurprisingly, Africa has been quick to adapt to the space opening up for them in the multipolar setting to negotiate with the ex-colonial masters.

Last Monday, General **Abdourahmane Tchiani** who is the titular head of the coup, refused to meet the US Acting Deputy Secretary of State **Victoria Nuland**. Nuland and other US officials asked to see Bazoum in person, but that request was also turned down. Instead, Nuland had to negotiate with the commander of Niger's Special Operations Forces and one of the leaders of the coup, Brig. Gen. **Moussa Salaou Barmou**, who serves as chief of defence.

Interestingly, Barmou had attended the *US National Defence University* and was trained at Fort Benning in Georgia. Obviously, the junta hoped to engage with Washington. "*The Intercept*" has since exposed¹ that Barmou was not the only Nigerien general trained by the US who was involved in the coup.

It said, "Two weeks after Niger's coup, the State Department has still not provided a list of the US-connected mutineers, but a different US official confirmed that there are 'five people we've identified as having received [US military] training'." Conceivably, Washington is keeping its cards close to the chest and is keeping the Russians guessing.

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The US faces a messy situation in Niger. Its priorities are two-fold – one, block any Russian move to have Wagner fighters replace the French contingent in Niger, and, two, keep its three bases in Niger come what may.

If the Biden administration has not formally labelled the military takeover in Niger a coup, it is because such a designation will not permit further security assistance to Niger where the US has a 1100-strong military presence and, more importantly, a drone base, known as air-base 201, near Agadez in central Niger built at a cost of more than \$100 million, which has been used since 2018 for operations in the Sahel.

A *Reuters* report stated, “One of the US officials said if Wagner fighters turn up in Niger it would not automatically mean US forces would have to leave.” The official said a scenario where a few dozen Wagner forces base themselves in Niger’s capital Niamey is unlikely to affect the US’ military presence, but “if thousands of Wagner fighters spread across the country, including near Agadez, problems could arise because of safety concerns for US personnel ... Regardless, the US will put a high bar for any decision to leave the country.”

In this bizarre shadow play between Washington and Moscow, the US may not push for a military intervention in Niger by the ECOWAS, lest its military presence in Niger becomes untenable. Of course, the coup leaders in Niamey have also been smart enough not to make any demand so far to remove American troops from Niger.

Against this murky backdrop, the US State Department announcement on Wednesday that *new American ambassador to Niger*,² *Kathleen FitzGibbon* – formerly number two in the embassy in Nigeria – will arrive in Niamey later this week comes as no surprise. It is a signal of Washington’s confidence about continued engagement with the situation. The State Department deputy spokesperson *Vedant Patel* told reporters that there are no plans for the new ambassador to present her credentials to coup leaders.

Meanwhile, the African Union’s Peace and Security Council, the organ in charge of enforcing the bloc’s decisions, met in Addis Ababa on Monday and rejected an ECOWAS proposal on military intervention in Niger. Several southern and northern African member countries were “fiercely against any military intervention.”

Taken together, these developments have put the ECOWAS on the back foot. To compound matters, the coup leaders have since announced their intention to put Bazoum on trial for “high treason” and undermining state security. Interestingly, the military regime claims to have “gathered the necessary evidence to prosecute before competent national and international authorities the ousted president and his local and foreign accomplices.”

Bazoum is being charged following his post-coup exchanges with high-ranking West African politicians and “their international mentors,” whom the coup leaders accuse of making false allegations and attempting to derail a peaceful transition in order to justify a military intervention.

These developments coupled with *growing domestic opposition*³ within Nigeria, which heads the ECOWAS currently, has forced appear to be President *Bola Tinubu* to shift his stance on military intervention. A powerful Nigerian delegation comprising top Islamic clerics travelled to Niger to open talks with the junta, which promptly agreed to dialogue with the ECOWAS on the way forward in the country. With the passage of time, the ECOWAS is losing the initiative which works to the advantage of the coup leaders.

Basically, while poor governance, rampant corruption, escalating poverty and insecurity have created conditions for the coups in Sahel region, a deeper factor is the geopolitics of resource access and control. Foreign powers are competing to explore and control the abundant mineral resources of West African nations.

The ascendant tensions in Niger and the wider subregion are no doubt exacerbated by the geopolitical and economic rivalry between the East and the West. The spectre that haunts West Africa is that the proxy war between Russia and the US can easily creep into Africa, where Russian mercenaries and Western Special Forces are already stationed for new assignments.

Source: <https://www.indianpunchline.com/frances-colonial-legacy-us-security-concerns-intersect-in-niger-russians-at-the-gates-look-for-new-hunting-grounds/>, 17 August 2023

¹ <https://theintercept.com/2023/08/16/niger-coup-junta-us-military/>

² <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2023/08/16/New-US-ambassador-heads-to-Niger-despite-coup>

³ <https://www.channelstv.com/2023/08/16/northern-elders-forum-urges-tinubu-to-remove-sanctions-on-niger-republic/>