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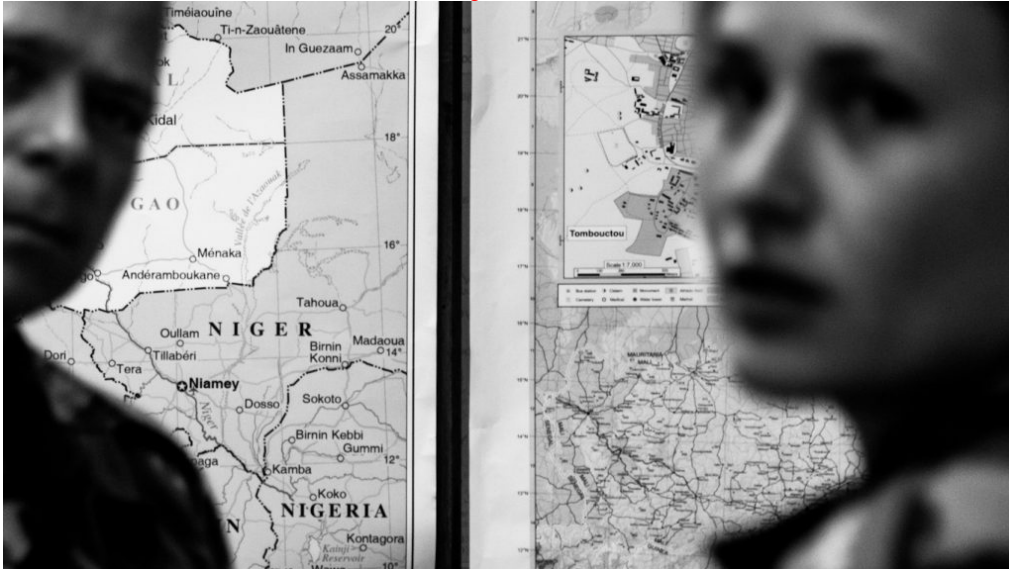
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زبانهای اروپایی

By Alan MacLeod

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ECOWAS became a tool of Western imperialism in Africa



Sources: Mint Press [Image: A map of West Africa provides the backdrop for a brief during Western Accord in Harskamp, Netherlands, July 24, 2015. Western Accord 2015 is a command post exercise that simulates Western intervention in Mali. Photo | U.S. Army]

Niger is emerging as the surprising frontline of the new Cold War.

Yesterday the 15-member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) [ordered](#) the "activation" and "deployment" of military forces "on standby" in the country, an action that threatens to trigger a major international war that could make Syria look smaller. In this endeavour, ECOWAS has received the full support of the United States and Europe, leading many to suspect that it is being used as an imperial vehicle to stamp out anti-colonial projects in West Africa. On July 26, a group of Nigerien officers overthrew the corrupt government of Mohamed Bazoum.

The move, which the junta presents as a patriotic uprising against a Western puppet, is [hugely popular](#) in the country, and many of Niger's neighbors have declared that any attack will be considered an attack on their entire sovereignty. The United States and France are also considering military action, while many in Niger are asking for Russian help. Consequently, the world waits to see if the region will be embroiled in a war that promises to attract many of the world's major powers. But what is ECOWAS? And why do so many in Africa consider the organization a tool of Western neocolonialism?

"Part of a corrupt clique"

Even before the dust settled in Niger, ECOWAS sprang into action, imposing a no-fly zone and harsh economic sanctions, including freezing Niger's national assets and suspending all financial sanctions. Nigeria has cut off electricity to its northern neighbor. The regional bloc also immediately came to Bazoum's defense, issuing an ominous statement declaring that it would "take all necessary measures," including "the use of force," to restore constitutional order. ECOWAS also gave the new military government a deadline to withdraw or face consequences. That deadline has passed and ECOWAS troops are [preparing](#) for action. Therefore, ECOWAS member states may be forced to send their troops to Niger. However, many nations resist the prospect. The bloc still seems adamant that military action could come at any time. "We are determined to stop it, but ECOWAS is not going to tell the coup plotters when and where we are going to attack. That is an operational decision that will be taken by the heads of state," [said](#) Abdel-Fatau Musah, the group's commissioner for political affairs, peace and security. Even though it has not yet acted, the threat of an invasion is far from idle. Since 1990, ECOWAS has launched military interventions in seven West African countries, most recently in Gambia in 2017. This response has disappointed many viewers.

Journalist Eugene Puryear, for example, [described](#) the bloc as "part of a corrupt clique that is directly linked to Western imperial powers to keep Africans poor." Those Western powers immediately lined up behind ECOWAS's position. "The United States welcomes and commends the strong leadership of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government in upholding constitutional order in Niger, actions that respect the will of the people of Niger and align with ECOWAS and the African Union's enshrined principles of 'zero tolerance for unconstitutional change.'" read a [State Department press release](#).

Africa is preparing for war. Following the coup in Niger and the removal of the French puppet from the presidential post, the West African organization ECOWAS, which is under

the full control of the United States and France, announced that it would attack Niger. pic.twitter.com/s2cDrGybNQ. Megatron (@Megatron_ron) [August 1, 2023](#)

Calling the coup "completely illegitimate," the French government also said it "firmly and resolutely supports ECOWAS's efforts to defeat this coup attempt." "The EU also joined ECOWAS' first response to the matter," said Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs, thus giving the green light to an intervention. Acting US Deputy Secretary Victoria Nuland also strongly hinted that the US is considering invading Niger itself. "It's not our desire to go there, but they [the new military junta] can push us to that point," Nuland said of her recent trip to Niger, where, she [said](#), she had an "extremely frank and sometimes quite difficult" meeting with the new leadership.

One measure of how close ECOWAS is to the United States is the constant support Washington provides to the organization. Throughout 2022, the State Department issued statements endorsing ECOWAS' position on Mali (another country where the military deposed an unpopular Western-backed government). "The United States commends the strong actions taken by ECOWAS in defense of democracy and stability in Mali," the State Department [wrote](#). It has also issued similar memoranda reaffirming its unwavering support for ECOWAS actions against military coups in [Guinea](#) and [Burkina Faso](#). This has led many critics to see ECOWAS as little more than a pawn of the United States. While Washington has presented the situation as ECOWAS defending democracy against authoritarianism, the reality is more complex. First, many of the governments of its member states have decidedly shaky democratic credentials.

President Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire, for example, violated the country's term limit law and was controversially sworn in for a third term last year. Protests against his seizure of power were repressed, leaving dozens dead. Meanwhile, the government of Senegalese President Macky Sall banned the main opposition party and jailed its leader. Moreover, ECOWAS' response to the blows is far from uniform. After Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba took power in Burkina Faso in 2022, ECOWAS refused to even impose sanctions, let alone consider an invasion. Instead, they simply asked Damiba to present a timetable for the "reasonable return to constitutional order." His indifference to events may be due to his staunchly pro-Western outlook and the fact that [he](#) had been trained by the US military and State Department. ECOWAS' senior leadership is also deeply intertwined with U.S. power. [As noted](#) by journalists Alex Rubinstein and Kit Klarenberg, the bloc's chairman, Bola Tinbu, "spent years laundering millions for heroin traffickers in Chicago" and then became a key State Department source for analyzing West Africa.

Former ECOWAS president Mahamadou Issoufou was also a "staunch ally of the West," in the words of *The Economist* magazine, though many in Africa might use less neutral language to describe him. In this regard, it might be applicable to compare ECOWAS with other US-dominated regional bodies, such as the Organization of American States (OAS). While the OAS is formally independent, it has consistently aligned itself with Washington and attacked enemy countries such as Venezuela and Cuba. A document from USAID (a U.S. government organization) [noted](#) that the OAS was a crucial tool to "advance U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere by countering the influence of anti-U.S. countries" such as Cuba and Venezuela.

A U.S. Army rifleman passes security with a Ghanaian soldier during a training exercise near Camp Thies, Senegal, in 2014. Photo | U.S. Army [title]

Economic domination

ECOWAS [traces](#) its own African integration project to 1945 and the creation of the CFA franc, a move that brought France's African colonies to a single monetary union. The currency, still in use by 14 African countries today, was artificially pegged to the French franc and then the euro, meaning that importing and exporting to France (and later to the eurozone) was very cheap, but importing and exporting to the rest of the world was prohibitively expensive. Thus, even after formal independence, the CFA franc trapped African countries in economic submission to Paris.

As a result, many African governments remain powerless to enact serious political and economic changes, as they lack control over their own monetary policy. Economically, this has been a boon to France, which enjoys a huge resource base from which to extract raw materials at artificially cheap prices, and also a captive export market. It has also meant that France has maintained a good degree of control over its former colonies. "Without Africa," [said](#) former French President François Mitterrand, "France will have no history in the twenty-first century." But this unfair economic system has also benefited African elites, who can import French and European luxuries at the abnormal exchange rate. And it has also allowed them to divert African money to European banks, and the French authorities are happy to turn a blind eye to the practice.

France still [holds](#) half of the gold reserves of the CFA franc countries. The result has been stagnation and underdevelopment in Francophone Africa. Niger's real GDP per capita today is significantly lower than at the time of its formal independence from France in 1960. France remains by far its largest trading partner, and Niger's economy revolves

around exporting uranium to Paris, where it is used to supply the country with cheap nuclear energy. However, ordinary Nigeriens see little or no benefit from this agreement. As Oxfam [said](#) in 2013: "In France, one in three light bulbs is lit by uranium from Niger. In Niger, almost 90% of the population has no access to electricity. This situation cannot continue." Thus, to a large extent, France's prosperity is based on African suffering and vice versa. This explains the widespread anti-colonial sentiment in West Africa. The July military coup was sparked by public demonstrations against the Bazoum government's decision to welcome French troops into the country, even after their presence in Mali precipitated a coup last year.

Niger's new junta suspended gold and uranium exports to France. "Down with France, foreign bases out" was the rallying cry of protesters who took to the streets of the capital, Niamey, and other cities across the country. Bazoum, however, has remained firmly loyal to France. In an [interview](#) with *The Financial Times* in May, he defended Paris by claiming that "France is an easy target for populist discourse of certain opinions, especially on social media among African youth." Thus, without Bazoum, Niger could go from being the West's number one ally in the region to becoming an adversary.

The coup in Niger has made it blatantly clear what an obedient lapdog ECOWAS is to former colonial overlord France. The regional alliance of West African states could also change its name now as the Paris enforcer. Moving in unison with the West, ECOWAS imposed sanctions on those affected by poverty... pic.twitter.com/vMwlvVZqff. – African Current (@african_stream) [August 8, 2023](#)

Regional integration, regional war?

ECOWAS imposes strict Western-sanctioned economic measures on its member states, forcing them to obey neoliberal economic laws that make it difficult to escape the cycle of debt and underdevelopment and helped make peaceful and democratic change harder to achieve and, ironically, spurred a military surge. insurrections throughout the region.

The coup in Niger follows similar actions in Mali in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso (two in 2022) and Guinea (2021). All have positioned themselves as progressive, patriotic and anti-imperialist uprisings against an economic order created by the West. All four nations are currently suspended from ECOWAS. A large number of states have rejected the Western/ECOWAS position. "The authorities of the Republic of Guinea dissociate themselves from the sanctions imposed by ECOWAS," the Guinean government [wrote](#), describing them as "illegitimate and inhumane" and "urging ECOWAS to think better again." The governments of Mali and Burkina Faso went much further. In a

joint [statement](#), those nations welcomed Bazoum's overthrow, describing the event as Niger "taking its destiny into its own hands and being accountable to history for complete sovereignty." Together, they denounced "regional organizations" [i.e., ECOWAS] for imposing sanctions that "increase the suffering of populations and endanger the spirit of Pan-Africanism." Perhaps most importantly, however, they stated bluntly that they would come to Niger's military aid if ECOWAS invaded. "Any military intervention against Niger would mean a declaration of war against Burkina Faso and Mali," they wrote. Algeria, which shares a long border with Niger, has also warned that it will not sit idly by if the West or its puppets attack Niger.

President Putin meets with President Ibrahim Traore as part of the second 2023 Russia-Africa summit in Moscow. Dmitri Azarov - España | AP[/caption]

Pan-Africanism, the anti-imperialist project that attempts to create a brotherhood of nations in Africa to develop independently, has experienced a renaissance in West Africa lately. Burkina Faso and Mali, Niger's neighbors to the west, are in advanced stages of merging into a federation. "The process is underway," [said](#) Ibrahim Traoré, Burkina Faso's charismatic military leader, revealing that his armies are now so integrated that "it's really the same army." He also strongly hinted that he wanted Niger to join the federation:

We cannot exclude the idea of another state joining us... If there are other states that are interested (we will surely approach Guinea) and if others are interested, we have to join. It's what young people demand."

ECOWAS has spoken out strongly against the idea, but Traoré remained defiant. "We will fight, but Africa must unite. The more united we are, the more effective we are," he said. Traoré has presented himself as a radical leader in the style of Thomas Sankara, Burkina Faso's Marxist revolutionary leader between 1983 and 1987. Sporting a red beret as Sankara did, Traoré asks questions such as "Why is Africa still the poorest region in the world?" and [describes](#) many of his fellow African leaders as "puppets in the hands of the imperialists." He likes to quote Cuban leader Che Guevara and has allied his nation with Nicaragua and Venezuela.

People gather for a ceremony in front of the building where Thomas Sankara was killed in 1987 in Burkina Faso, on April 6, 2022. Sophie Garcia - España | AP[/title]

Colonial outpost

Nigeriens, whether they support the coup or not, are fed up with being treated as a colonial outpost. Bazoum, who came to power in a disputed and disputed 2021 election, saw his approval ratings plummet after it was announced that Niger would host thousands of French troops who had previously been expelled from Mali and Burkina Faso. The presence of those soldiers precipitated coups in both countries and immediately provoked angry demonstrations in Niger. Bazoum, whom the BBC [described](#) as a "key Western ally," did not listen and welcomed the troops. Today Niger hosts nearly 1500 French soldiers, as well as many more from the armed forces of Germany, Italy and the United States.

The new military government has instructed France to withdraw its troops. Niger is the cornerstone of the US military operation in Africa and hosts around 1100 people at six bases. In 2019, the US opened [Air Base 201](#), a massive \$110 million airfield that it uses to conduct drone operations throughout the Sahel region. The stated reason for the foreign troops is to help the region deal with Islamist terrorism. But the threat of Islamist terrorism only arose from the destruction of Libya by NATO in 2011 (another country with which Niger shares a border). The military alliance's onslaught turned Libya from a nation with one of Africa's highest living standards into a failed state run by jihadists, replete with open-air slave markets.

The coup, therefore, enjoys broad support within the country. A [poll](#) published by *The Economist* earlier this week found that 73% of Nigeriens want the military junta to remain in power and only 27% want Bazoum back. Tens of thousands [filled](#) the Seyni Kountché stadium in Niamey to express their desire for independence and denounce threats of American or French intervention. "If ECOWAS forces decide to attack our country, before reaching the presidential palace, they will have to walk on our bodies, shed our blood. We will do it [give our lives] with pride because we have no other country; we only have Niger. Since July 26 our country has decided to take charge of its independence and sovereignty," said protester [Ibrahim Bana](#).

Russia's role

While Russia is largely seen in the West as an authoritarian and nefarious regime that interferes in other nations, much of Africa views Moscow positively. The Soviet Union generally supported struggles for African independence and the Russian Federation has not invaded any African nations. Almost all African states attended the Russia-Africa Summit in July, while only four African leaders [participated](#) in an official meeting with

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky last year. The same *Economist* [poll](#) asked Nigeriens which foreign power they trusted most. 60% chose Russia. Only about 1 in 10 chose the US, even fewer chose France and none chose Britain.

Russian flags are now a common sight in Niamey and many expect some kind of help from Moscow. However, ousted President Bazoum took to the pages of *The Washington Post* to ask the United States for help, [warning](#) that "the entire central Sahel region could fall under Russian influence through the Wagner Group." Indeed, Wagner has been invited by several African governments, including Mali, which see the Russian mercenary force as a counterweight to Western troops. Wagner's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, recently spoke approvingly of the coup, though Moscow has been much more reluctant to take sides.

Map of African countries that have signed military agreements with Russia <pic.twitter.com/CKIAC9zePv>. – La Cuna (@TheCradleMedia) [August 3, 2023](#)

The big concern for many is that the fighting in Niger will trigger a wider war between West African nations that will no doubt ask Europe and the United States for help. If this happens, the military governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger will no doubt ask Russia for help, turning the situation into something akin to the Syrian civil war but on a larger scale.

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, France cut off energy imports from Russia, which made Niger's uranium for its aging nuclear power plants more crucial. However, any attempt at regime change in Niger to restart uranium supplies will anger Algeria, with which it recently [signed](#) a natural gas import agreement. Thus, the French position is riddled with contradictions and complications.

As Western power diminishes, a multipolar world begins to be born. As part of that birth, the people of West Africa dream of a different future. Time will tell whether military coups turn out to be a liberating force or actions that do nothing to help the oppressed peoples of the region. However, one thing is clear: the United States and France are not happy with the changes taking place and will fight to maintain their control over Africa. To this end, ECOWAS has proved to be an important tool at its disposal. However, with so many conflicting interests and so many forces unwilling to compromise, the situation in Niger threatens to escalate into an international war that will draw global attention to one of the world's most ignored regions. Featured photo |

[Alan MacLeod](#) is a senior staff writer at MintPress News. After completing her PhD in 2017, she published two books: [Bad News From Venezuela: Twenty Years of Fake News](#)

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