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In the jungles of French policy on Africa.

Part III: The end of the notorious FranceAfrique policy – or will its ‘less noticeable’ continuation follow?



The issue of reducing the French military presence in Africa has been on Paris' the agenda for many years. When taking up their duties, all of the recent French presidents – without exception – gave a kind of oath that they would address this issue and build relations with African partners on an equal and fair basis.

Upon assuming the presidency in 2008, Nicolas Sarkozy declared that France would no longer be the ‘gendarme of Africa’ and would reduce its military presence there.

After his election, Francois Hollande also promised to end the discredited FranceAfrique policy, according to which France unofficially received the exclusive right to develop

African mineral resources and markets for its products. In turn, it acted as a guarantor of the preservation of authoritarian leaders of a pro-French orientation in power.

During his election campaign, E. Macron sharply criticised France's Africa policy, making statements about the need to bring it in line with new democratic standards. However, as was the case of his predecessors, all of this turned out to be complete demagoguery and Paris' policy in Africa became even more militaristic and paternalistic than ever before.

France's empty promises

On the eve of his visit to Gabon, the DRC, Angola and the Republic of the Congo, in February 2023, speaking at the Elysee Palace, he proclaimed the beginning of a «new era» in relations with African countries. In particular, he announced a new approach to the development of security ties and plans to intensify economic cooperation. Stating once again that the former French colonies are no longer the «backyard» of Paris, he promised to refuse to interfere in their internal affairs and develop relations with them based on mutual interests and the fulfilment of commitments.

This statement of E. Macron on the transition to a new strategy in relations with Africa evoked a mixed reaction in the analytical circles of African and other countries. Some experts considered it not to be a revision of policy, but only an intention to adapt to the new geopolitical realities on the continent and, according to Togolese expert Raissa Girondin, try to «return the hearts of Africans to the bosom of French politics, in which they have long-lost faith». Others said they did not see anything new from what he declared back in 2017, speaking in Burkina Faso at the University of Ouagadougou.

The Turkish Anadolu Agency news agency notes that the majority of representatives of the African expert community hold the opinion that until Paris in practice gets rid of its superiority complex towards Africa and abandons the FranceAfrique policy, all statements by Paris about «deep humility» in relations with Africa caused by the weakening of its positions in the Sahel zone will be unfounded.

In France itself, Le Temps emphasises, experts advise the creators of Africa policy to «go down to the sinful earth and take a closer «look at globalized Africa». From their point of view, France can no longer demand any geopolitical loyalty from young putschist colonels, and more recently, captains, despite the fact that they were trained in French military educational institutions.

Open letter from senators to the French president: Africa no longer understands France

After the military coup in Niger in August 2023, a group of 94 French senators from various political parties, including Roger Karoutchi, First Vice-President of the Senate for International Relations, Bruno Retailleau, head of the Republican faction, and Christian Cambon, Chairman of the Senate Commission on Foreign Affairs and Defence, sent an open letter to President E. Macron, in which, after listing the latest diplomatic and military failures of France in Africa, they demanded a fundamental revision of Paris' policy in this direction.

«Today Niger, and yesterday Mali, CAR, Burkina Faso turned away from France, demanding the withdrawal of its troops and some French companies... All this is accompanied by anti-French demonstrations that spread to countries as close to us as the Ivory Coast or Senegal», the authors of the message stressed. According to them, «Africa, once a friendly continent to us, no longer understands France and increasingly challenges its presence on the continent». In view of this, the time has come, the senators believe, to reconsider their perception of Africa and approaches to developing relations with it in the new conditions of increasing competition.

The senators' appeal came three days after the coup on July 26, 2023, when Paris suspended development assistance to the country, as well as budget support, despite previous assurances from E. Macron in February of the same year about the fact that the new Africa strategy in development would be based on an «equal partnership» and non-interference by Paris in the internal affairs of African countries.

This led to the leadership of Niger announcing on state television on August 3 the termination of military agreements and protocols with France, which continued to rule it for more than 60 years after the country gained independence.

Paris is reducing its military presence in Africa

The demands of the senators and the discontent of the country's socio-political circles eventually forced the French president, at a meeting of the Defence Council in mid-December, 2023, to decide to reduce military personnel at French military bases in West and Central Africa.

According to the AFP news agency, citing sources in the French Foreign and the Defence Ministries, it is planned to reduce the number of the French contingent from 350 to 100 people at bases in Gabon and Senegal, from 600 to 350 in Côte d'Ivoire and from 1,000 to 300 people in Chad. It is assumed that the former bases will become combat training centres for local army personnel and will cease to function as strongholds for independent military operations.

According to the Chief of Staff of the French Air and Space Force, General Stephane Mille, the intention to reduce the number of French troops in Africa does not imply the cessation of counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel. According to him, Paris, if necessary, in cooperation with African countries, can deploy its military units «for a certain period of time to conduct them [counter-terrorism operations] or train local personnel» using the French Air Force. This innovation is justified by the expediency of «reducing the visibility» of the French military presence on the continent, which is negatively perceived by the population and leads to an increase in anti-French sentiment». The reductions are not expected to affect the French military base in Djibouti. It is believed that it serves as a key transit point for Paris on the way between continental France and the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, it is planned to create a military academy and a training ground of regional importance on its territory for the training of military personnel from Africa and the Middle East.

To manage the units remaining at these bases in Gabon, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Chad, an African Command is being created, headed by General Pascal Ianni, who has already been appointed to this position and who previously served as an adviser to the Ministry of Defence on Africa, as well as heading the Centre for Military Forecasting and Strategy of the General Staff of the French Armed Forces. In expert circles, he is considered a confidant of Chief of Defence Thierry Burkhard.

It is assumed that the African Command, with a staff of 80 people, will be located in France and subordinate to the Centre for Planning and Conducting Military Operations of the General Staff. Its priorities will include organising assistance to African countries in the fight against terrorism, training African armed forces, emergency response, as well as conducting information warfare, the essence of which would be to stop the growth of anti-French sentiment and create a positive image of France.

At the same time, the Chief of Defence Staff of France, General Thierry Burkhard, stated that France is ready to cooperate with US or European allies to maintain established ties with the local military to «gather intelligence» and maintain operational cooperation.

The main goal of the developers of the new strategy is to make the French military presence in Africa «less noticeable». Given the continuing need to combat terrorism, this function is likely to be removed from the armed forces and shifted to special forces, being the least «visible» security structure.

The surface-level makeover of the façade of Paris' Africa policy

Explaining the essence of Paris' new approach to developing ties with Africa, a French official said that from now on, France would not be in the foreground, but would act from behind the scenes. In this case, the French president followed in the footsteps of his US counterpart Barack Obama, who preferred to act in Africa from behind, from the shadows. Currently, these ideas are being worked out by the French Foreign and Defence Ministries under the leadership of the Personal Envoy of the President for Africa, Jean-Marie Bockel, with representatives of African countries.

Despite all these steps and statements by E. Macron about correcting Paris' strategy on Africa, according to the expert of the Centre for International Political Studies of Cameroon, Alain Kone, he will do everything possible to maintain French influence in the Sahel on the same level, at least because it is rich in resources that are more than necessary for the French economy.

The French magazine *Afrique XXI* speaks more specifically in this regard, calling the «new option» of the presence of French troops in the Sahel a «cheap trick to distract the eyes», which the French president decided to pull off. According to Raphael Granvaux, analyst of this magazine, this will only result in a surface-level makeover of the facade of Paris' Africa policy, associated with the image of the «African gendarme».

In this regard, it seems doubtful that Paris, as part of the announced reformatting of its Africa strategy, will ever be able to stop the irreversible process of the reduction of its political influence on the African continent in the new geopolitical conditions of a rapidly changing multipolar world.

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