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France/Africa:

France and its African policy

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With the exception of Sudan, the recent coups in Africa have all taken place in France's former colonies. Although the situations are quite different in Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Niger or Gabon, these *pronunciamientos* have raised questions in Paris about French policy in Africa. This is a theme that is rarely addressed in the mainstream media or by the political parties.

The way the subject has been overwhelmingly treated illustrates the link that France has with its former colonies. The general idea is that Paris is losing Africa. As if this continent, or at least part of it, continued to belong to the former colonial power despite six decades of independence. There is a consensus among the major political forces, whether on the right or the left, that France, by its common history with its former colonies, has a special responsibility which would justify its military interventions. For example, during the debate in the National Assembly in 2013, no deputy voted against the renewal of Operation Serval, the first military intervention in Mali, followed later by a second one across the Sahel called Operation Barkhane. One of the most left-wing deputies, François Asensi from the Front de Gauche, said on this occasion: "The stakes were essential: to prevent Malians from being subjected to a regime of terror and to preserve the stability of the Sahel.... Our support has been accompanied by a number of reservations, but there is no doubt that our troops have achieved significant successes on the ground." [1]

Safeguarding France's interests

This situation is the result of the decolonization process instituted by France in the early 1960s. The French authorities had perceived that maintaining the colonies was becoming increasingly costly politically. The idea was therefore to grant formal independence while maintaining the ties of subordination that structured the colonial relationship. This policy even had a name, *Françafrique*. Commentators spoke of the independence of the flag, where only the flag changed.

This subordination was formalized on the basis of agreements between states that guaranteed France its military presence, control of the currency through the maintenance of the CFA franc (see box), and a monopoly of access to raw materials, particularly oil and uranium. At the same time, cohorts of French aid workers were present in the main ministries. All the heads of state "benefited" from French political advisers. The situation was sometimes caricatural as evidenced by one of the autocrats most loyal to France, Congolese President Denis Sassou Nguesso. During his visit to his Central African counterpart Kolingba in the 1990s, he said: "He didn't even pretend to lead. When we, the heads of neighbouring states, arrived at the airport, it was a certain French commander, Mansion, who showed up in shorts and a shirt to greet us." [2]

Another anecdote that is just as revealing is the existence during the reign of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, in Côte d'Ivoire, of an underground corridor linking the French embassy with the presidential palace.

France's African backyard has evolved. It encompasses the French-speaking countries that emerged from Belgian colonization. A backyard considered to be the reserved domain of the French President. The latter could launch as many military operations as deemed necessary (see box).

A similar case can be found with the Monroe Doctrine, which laid the basis for relations between the United States and the countries of Latin America. Developed in the nineteenth century, it gradually evolved to build the foundations

of Washington's policy towards the countries of the South American continent, considered to be the preserve of the United States.

Françafrique has obviously evolved, but the fundamentals have remained. Four axes can be distinguished: a military presence, the maintenance of monetary control, support for the government in place and diplomatic solidarity. Certainly, there have been changes throughout history. What France could do with impunity, for example help re-establish the dictatorship of Léon Mba in Gabon in 1964, or in the Central African Republic overthrow Bokassa who was dangerously close to Gaddafi's Libya, is now much more difficult, especially after the complicity of the French army in the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994.

With regard to the CFA franc, the French authorities have had to accept changes in the management of this currency. Finally, at the diplomatic level, France no longer has leadership over its former colonies, as we could see in the vote condemning Russia's aggression in Ukraine where countries such as Senegal, Togo, Cameroon or the Republic of Congo, traditional allies of France, abstained.

Crisis of France's neocolonial policy in Africa

The deep crisis of French imperialism in Africa has been hidden by the so-called military successes of the French army in Mali with Operation Serval. As a reminder, the imperialist intervention in Libya by Britain and France, supported by the United States, had the effect of totally destabilizing the region. Many Tuaregs from Mali, integrated into Gaddafi's army, returned to their country with weapons and baggage in the literal sense. They began a guerrilla war that fostered another, that of the jihadists.

To counter the advance of the Islamist rebels, the Malian president at the time, Amadou Toumani Touré, requested an armed intervention by France. This took place under the name of Operation Serval. This intervention did not in any way defeat the terrorists, as the French authorities claimed. It has had the effect of fragmenting the jihadist forces that have spread across the north of the country. Then Operation Serval was transformed into Operation Barkhane with a geographical increase in its field of intervention in the Sahel-Saharan strip. Barkhane operated in three countries, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Since then, they have all experienced a coup d'état.

Despite promises, the French army has been unable to restore a security situation acceptable to the population. On the contrary, it has worsened considerably, to the point that the various armed groups control nearly three-quarters of Mali's territory, according to Alioune Tine, an expert mandated by the UN Human Rights Council, and more than 40% in Burkina Faso. This failure has tarnished France's credibility.

But the resentment of a large part of African youth against French policy goes back much further. Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy made headlines during his speech in Dakar in 2007. He declared that Africa had not gone down in history. This claim echoed Hegel's view of the continent and has been challenged by historians for decades. In the same speech, he considered that colonization had had positive aspects. Very recently, Bruno Retailleau, president of the right-wing group Les Républicains in the Senate, spoke of the happy days of colonization.

With Emmanuel Macron, the arrogance continues. Having made a humiliating joke about his host and Burkinabe counterpart, he went on to talk on another occasion about the high fertility rate of African women as the source of Africa's difficulties. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), he declared that this country was incapable of defending its sovereignty, that France had nothing to do with it, omitting to say that the security crisis is largely the consequence of Operation Turquoise. Indeed, France has exfiltrated thousands of genocidaires from Rwanda into

the DRC who have sacked the Kivu region. At the beginning of 2020 Macron summoned the African presidents of the Sahel to Pau, to rebuke them. The latter had allegedly not sufficiently defended the French troops intervening in their country.

Added to this is France's repressive migration policy, Islamophobic measures under the pretext of secularism and its variable geometry policy. Paris condemns the coups d'état in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger but endorses the seizure of power by the son of the late dictator Idriss Déby in Chad and makes resounding declarations about democracy in Africa while congratulating the autocrats elected following electoral farces and/or constitutional manipulations.

France appears to be a country clinging to its neocolonial policy. The latest episode is Niger. Under the pretext of not recognising the government set up by the putschists, the French authorities maintained their ambassador, who had been declared *persona non grata*, and refused to withdraw the 1,500 soldiers stationed in Niamey. This is an inconsistent position because all joint operations against the jihadists between the Nigerien and French army have been cancelled. Faced with the mobilizations of the Nigeriens who blockaded the France embassy and the military base, the French authorities had to retreat and announce the departure of the troops before the end of the year. At the same time, Macron's government is aligning itself with the more hawkish wing of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) that favours military intervention. Vigilance is required because even during the withdrawal period, French control could still be a base of support for a military operation by Ecowas. A plausible hypothesis. Indeed, *Le Monde* informs us that a French intervention was planned to free the deposed president Mohammad Bazoum and was cancelled at the last minute at his request. Other examples exist of the interference of the French army in the internal problems of African countries. For example, Operation Licorne in Côte d'Ivoire, initially planned to keep the peace between rebels led by Alassane Ouattara and the government of Laurent Gbagbo, was used to overthrow the latter in 2011. Closer to home, in 2019, the French army bombed the columns of the rebel movement Union of Resistance Forces (UFR) and thus saved the day for the dictatorship of Idriss Déby in Chad.

France's hard-line policy leads it to an unworthy diplomacy. Lately, all public artistic scenes have been told to cease all cooperation with artists from Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali. Visas for students from these three countries are suspended. As if artists and students were responsible for coups d'état in their countries.

A profound evolution of African countries

The resentment against France and more generally against rich countries is also explained by the profound changes that African countries are experiencing.

The wave of democratization that began in the 1990s took place at the same time as the structural adjustment policies imposed by the international financial institutions. And for the CFA franc countries, the French Ministry of Finance decided in 1994 on a 50% devaluation, leading to considerable declines in living standards. African governments have shown their inability to initiate a different economic policy. Not only have they submitted to the demands of the World Bank and the IMF, but most of their members have profited greatly from them during the privatization of entire sectors of the economy. This has led to popular disillusionment and distrust for politicians who take advantage of a fake democracy and to a certain popularity for coups d'état.

Profound changes have taken place on the continent. Relations between herders and farmers have deteriorated significantly as a result of the climate crisis. Conflicts over water points and land are a source of violent conflicts, some of which are becoming communitarian. This is fertile ground for the various Islamist groups that take advantage of these divisions and often feed them. Sometimes, their policies aim to challenge the social hierarchies of certain African societies. This is particularly the case for the Islamists of the Katiba Macina present in central Mali. They are

mainly aimed at disadvantaged Fulani pastoralists. They question the sums to be paid for grazing the herds, but also criticize the marabouts, religious dignitaries, for their greed. Some observers describe the jihadist struggles in central Mali as a radical struggle of the rural poor.

Other changes are emerging with opposition to social subordination, whether linked to servile lineage, i.e., families descended from slaves, or the young who have a duty of submission to their elders. The urban and rural struggles of women have achieved success in West Africa, such as Sierra Leone, on the issue of women's right to own land.

The consequence of these developments is that people, especially the youngest, are no longer willing to live as before. Discourses offering a credible alternative to falsely elected and corrupt governments enjoy the approval of young people with no prospects. These discourses are carried to the Sahel by Islamists, armed or not, and by putschists who use nationalist rhetoric. There is one thing these two tendencies have in common, and that is distrust of the West.

The French authorities have been unable to measure and consider these profound changes. To take just one example, during Operation Barkhane, France imposed its solution, that of a military settlement of the conflict. However, in Mali, the National Accord Conference, which began its work in 2017, had positioned itself for the opening of negotiations with Islamist rebels, at least those who were Malian. In 2019, during the holding of the inclusive national dialogue, the same request was again made by civil society organizations. France has consistently opposed it. It has imposed its policy, wholly security-oriented, with the success that we have seen. Ironically, the putschists in the Sahelian countries, whose anti-French verve is proven, are simply repeating the same recipes, refusing to try to deal politically with the conflicts raging in the region.

Inter-imperialist competition

Where France was considered the guarantor of stability in playing its role as Africa's gendarme, the debacle of the military intervention in the Sahel is reshuffling the cards. While the Chinese presence is manifested at the economic level, it is also increasingly military through its base in Djibouti, its military training of African officers as well as arms sales. The same goes for Russia, which since 2014 has made a big comeback on the continent, benefiting from a past of anti-colonial solidarity, a policy that opposes the West and the weakness of French imperialism. It should be remembered that it was on the advice of French diplomacy, which at the United Nations maintained its veto on arms imports to that country, that the government of the Central African Republic turned to the Russians. Sensing a good opportunity, Sergei Lavrov proposed to the Central African President, Faustin-Archange Touadera, a military partnership with the establishment of the Wagner militia.

The United States is also distancing itself from French policy in Africa. The case of Niger is revealing. Washington, which has a large military base, has chosen negotiation with the coup plotters rather than confrontation as France does. Beyond the need to preserve its presence in the country, the United States draws a negative assessment of the counterterrorism strategy implemented by Paris in the Sahel.

If France is seen in Africa as an empire in decline, its power of nuisance against the populations remains important. As evidenced by his various supports for African autocrats, Chad, Togo, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and so on. Hence the need for progressive forces to maintain an intransigent struggle against France's neocolonialism in Africa and to shorten the agony of Françafrique, which has decidedly gone on far too long.

Military Operations

French military interventions follow one another and are similar. The arguments always remain the same, the maintenance of the stability of the region, the preservation of the constitutional order, the protection of French or European nationals or the fight against terrorism. Above all, however, it is a question of keeping governments, mostly dictatorships, in power and thus ensuring the neo-colonial order.

- 1962 – Military intervention in Senegal to keep Léopold Sédar Senghor in power and maintain order in the country.
 - 1964 – Paratroopers intervene in Libreville, Gabon to save the dictatorship of Léon Mba.
 - From 1968 to 1972 – French troops operate in Chad to put down the rebellion in Tibesti.
 - 1977 – Operation Mazurka: Setting up an airlift against the Shaba rebellion and for the defence of Mobutu.
 - 1977 – Operation Manatee: intervention in Mauritania against the Polisario Front.
 - 1978 – Operation Tacaud: intervention in Chad with 2,000 troops to restore order and stability in the country (the operation lasted two years).
 - 1978 – Operation Bonito: second intervention in Zaire during the Shaba war, 600 paratroopers jump on Kolwezi.
 - 1979 – Operation Caban: intervention in the Central African Republic to depose Bokassa.
 - 1983-1984 – Operation Manta: 3,000 soldiers intervene in Chad to defend Hissène Habré against Goukouni Oueddeye.
 - 1986 – Operation Épervier: air intervention in northern Chad at Ouasi-Doum and installation of an air force in N'Djamena.
 - 1986 – Intervention in Togo to defend the dictatorship of Gnassingbé Eyadema.
 - 1989 – Operation OSIDE: 200 military personnel intervene in the Comoros.
 - 1990 – Operation Shark: French troops intervene in Libreville and Port-Gentil in Gabon to quell riots.
 - 1990-1993 – Operation Noroît: 600 soldiers are sent to defend the dictatorship of Juvenal Habyarimana against the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).
 - 1991 – Intervention in Zaire during riots.
 - 1991 – Operation Godoria: securing Djibouti, a French military base on the Horn of Africa.
 - 1992-1994 – Operation Turquoise: 500 paratroopers intervene in Rwanda just before the outbreak of the genocide, then 2,500 afterwards to set up the exfiltration of the main perpetrators of the genocide.
 - 1995 – Operation Azalea: intervention in the Comoros of nearly 1,000 soldiers.
 - 1996 – Operations Almandin 1 and 2: two successive operations involving more than 2,000 soldiers in the Central African Republic.
 - 1997 – Retaliatory operation against Central African fighters following the death of two French soldiers.
 - 1997 – Operation Pelican: successive interventions in Congo Brazzaville employing more than a thousand soldiers.
 - 1998 – Installation of a military presence in Congo Kinshasa
 - 1999 – Operation Khor Angar: intervention in Djibouti to secure the port and airport.
 - 2002 – Operation Licorne: intervention in Côte d'Ivoire around four thousand soldiers.
 - 2003 – Operation Boali, following the unrest in the Central African Republic
 - 2003 – Operation Artemis: intervention in Congo-Kinshasa, particularly in the north-east of the country in Ituri.
 - 2007 – Operation Alcyon: Maritime intervention in Somalia.
 - 2009 - Operation Sabre in Burkina Faso.
 - 2011 – Operation Harmattan: Colonel Gaddafi deposed.
 - 2013 – Operation Serval in Mali.
 - 2013 – Operation Sangaris in the Central African Republic.
 - 2014 – Operation Barkhane without the Sahelo-Saharan strip.
 - 2016 – Operation Sirli in Egypt: initially against jihadists, hijacked by the Egyptian authorities to neutralize simple smugglers.
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The CFA Franc

The successive names of the CFA franc testify to the willingness of the French authorities to make cosmetic changes without conceding anything on substance.

From the Franc of the French Colonies in Africa, it became the Franc of French West Africa and finally called the Franc of the Financial Community in Africa. A much more acceptable name.

There are two CFA francs, one used by West African countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo), the other by Central African countries (Cameroon, Gabon, Central African Republic, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo and Chad)

Before the last reform, the CFA franc system was based on three pillars:

- The obligation for countries of the West African Monetary Union (WAMU) to deposit half of their foreign exchange reserves with the French Treasury.
- The presence of French representatives of the Ministry of Economy and Finance in the decision-making bodies of the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO) which operated by consensus – effectively giving France a right of veto.
- A fixed parity of the CFA franc to the euro.

The CFA franc has become the symbol of French colonial survival in Africa and the subject of major struggles over the continent.

Saying, "I've heard the criticism, I see your youth reproaching us for continuing a relationship that they deem postcolonial. So, let's break the moorings" Macron will try to reform only the West African CFA franc by replacing it with the ECO. The latter, which was supposed to be launched in 2020, has been postponed indefinitely.

In short, 60 years later, the moorings are still not broken!

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[1] <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr/2012-2013/20130224.asp>

[2] <http://www.parismatch.com/Actu/International/On-s-en-prend-a-l-Afrique-parce-qu-elle-est-faible-540903>