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The Sahel's new dependency

The Sahelian juntas promised greater sovereignty. Their reliance on Russian forces may be producing the opposite

Last month's failed coup in Niger laid bare the extent of Russia's growing role in the Sahel. It also raised critical questions about the strategic viability of the Sahelian security model, which substitutes foreign mercenaries for a coherent national counter-insurgency strategy. The result is an uncomfortable paradox: the juntas' pursuit of sovereignty may be making their states more, rather than less, dependent on foreign military power.

On Saturday 29 August, hundreds of soldiers at the forefront of the West African country's war against jihadist insurgents abandoned the frontline and stormed the capital, Niamey. The move has been described as the biggest internal threat to General Abdourahamane Tiani's junta since it seized power three years ago from the country's democratically elected president, Mohamed Bazoum. The mutineers, mostly young soldiers from the Tillabéri region, were angered by heavy battle losses, poor welfare and perceived preferential treatment for the elite Presidential Guard, which Tiani had once commanded. They initially attempted to seize control of the state broadcaster and the Presidential Palace, but were repelled. They then took control of Air Base 101, a critical hub housing Niger's air defences and a substantial uranium stockpile.

Isolated and with only the elite Presidential Guard loyal to it, the junta teetered but was saved at the last minute by Russia's Africa Corps. The irony of the situation is hard to ignore. To overcome an internal rebellion from its own army, the Nigerien junta, which frames itself as a sovereigntist regime, had to call on a foreign army to rescue it by turning its guns on its own soldiers.

A modern-day Praetorian Guard

General Tiani came to power in Niger in July 2023, completing a triad of military regimes in the former French colonies of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, which later formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) after breaking with the Economic Community of West African States

(ECOWAS). They also severed security ties with the West, drove out Western troops and entered into a security partnership with Russia, which deployed its paramilitary force, the Africa Corps, to assist in their war against a range of global jihadist networks and Tuareg rebels.

Against this backdrop, Moscow was presented as a historically progressive partner for Africa's development compared to the imperialist West. And indeed, Russia does not carry the same colonial baggage. In the 50s and 60s, the Soviet Union played a crucial role in backing nationalists and pro-independence movements across Africa.

Whatever the historical ties, however, Russia's role in the Sahel today tells a different story. Not only has the result of their tie with Russia fallen short of its promised returns, but the Africa Corps' involvement in supporting the Tiani junta last month also suggests that the sovereignty of the Sahel is no longer safer with Russia than it ever was with France and the United States. The event also proves that Africa Corps' role in the Sahel now reaches beyond its stated goal of assisting client states with counterterrorism strategy and has morphed into a modern-day Praetorian Guard for the protection of the region's juntas and despots.

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This outcome duly reflects the degree to which the playbook of Russia's first experimental force, the defunct Wagner Group, remains relevant to this day. A private military contractor, the Wagner Group was instrumental in helping the late Sudan dictator, Omar El-Bashir, suppress angry protests against his rule in 2018. Likewise, in 2021, the group also played a key role in repelling rebels from overthrowing Central African Republic President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. Following the death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, in 2023, Russia rebranded the Wagner operation by creating the Africa Corps, a formal, state-controlled entity run directly by the Russian Ministry of Defence. The rebranding allowed Moscow to pursue its strategic, economic and geopolitical interests in Africa through an official arm of the Russian state.

While lacking the plausible deniability that the semi-autonomous Wagner Group granted Putin, the Africa Corps has nevertheless proven particularly useful as an instrument of regime protection to boost Russia's

competitive edge. This has far-reaching geopolitical implications beyond the obvious. Of course, in the crowded theatre of diplomatic jousting that the Sahel has become, Russia's ability to deploy militarily to defend its clients represents a smart value proposition that its closest competitors will struggle to match.

But the major concern lies in what this level of dependence does to the cohesion and sovereignty of Russia's vulnerable client states. As Niger's mutiny shows, a troubling fragility exists at the core of the Sahelian confederacy. Except for a few strongly worded proclamations of solidarity, the AES vaunted 6 000-strong standby force was missing in action during the Tiani junta's hour of distress. As their armies continue to bear the brunt of expanding jihadist and separatist violence, these states are becoming far too weak and vulnerable to fulfil the barest obligation of a government, i.e., guarantee territorial integrity, protection of lives and property and provision of basic welfare, let alone regional defence.

What this portrays is a severely fragile ecosystem that increases the propensity of chronic dependence by the weak and unstable Sahelian juntas on Russian bayonets. But alongside this propensity lies a risk of nations dependent on Russia for their security transforming into de facto Russian protectorates. Already, the cost of maintaining these security partnerships has become a drain on the countries' limited resources. Since 2021, Mali, which hosts about 2 500 African Corps personnel, has paid at least $1 billion to Russian mercenaries. While the exact amount paid by Niger and Burkina Faso is not publicly disclosed, the trend is the same, even as the duo's recent move towards resource nationalism strongly suggests that mining concessions could be used as leverage for military deals.

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But the result does not match the cost. Since the Africa Corps replaced the French-led *Opération Barkhane* and the United Nations MINUSMA peacekeeping operation, terrorism incidents in the Sahel have shot up. In 2024, the Liptako-Gourma borderlands of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger alone accounted for over half of all global terrorism-related deaths. Despite the presence of the Africa Corps, the bulk of the counter-terrorism operations still fall to the often poorly paid and equipped national armies of the Sahelian countries.

Following a history of battlefield reversals, the Africa Corps personnel

hardly venture beyond their operational base in the capital, preferring to rely on drones to mitigate operational losses. Earlier in April this year, the Africa Corps disgracefully retreated from the Northern Mali stronghold of Kidal, leaving whole communities at the mercy of jihadists and separatists. In Burkina Faso, the primary function of the Russian contingent of about 300 personnel is providing close-protection security for the junta leader, Captain Ibrahim Traoré.

What began as a promise of greater sovereignty thus ultimately risks producing the opposite. While Moscow's evolving military presence in Africa has failed to resolve the Jihadist and separatist violence plaguing the Sahel, Niger's failed mutiny has added a new layer. It demonstrates how chronic dependence on Russia's defence capability, particularly for regime survival, risks plunging the Sahel into the same cycle of disempowerment and imperialist domination that has hallmarked the region's relations with the West since colonial times.



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