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THE ROLE FRANCE PLAYED IN THE POLITICAL LIFE OF CHAD AND OTHER FORMER AFRICAN COLONIES

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ABSTRACT: *Chad, a former French colony in the heart of the African continent, has always been a region that, until recently, seemed very remote and of little interest to the Hungarian people. However, the Hungarian government's plan for the Hungarian Defence Forces to set up a possible military mission in Chad with the participation of 200 Hungarian service members has drawn attention to the situation and events in the region. The Sahel region is today considered the most dangerous and unstable region in the world, characterised by the presence and operation of numerous terrorist organisations and frequent coups d'état, forcing millions of people every day to start a new life as refugees on the European continent, leaving their homes or perhaps their countries of origin. In this article, we review the various historical, geographical, economic, and political factors that have led to this situation, the current situation and its likely outcome, and the role and responsibility of France.*

KEYWORDS: *Africa, Chad, France, military, French Armed Forces*

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INTRODUCTION

The 4000-mile-wide area in the heart of Africa, stretching from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, is known as the Sahel Area, or the Coup Belt of Africa. Today, it is probably the most dangerous and unstable area in the world.

The area has historically been terribly deprived and plagued by poor economic governance. In recent years, however, the region has been wracked by democratic retreat, several coups d'état, high levels of terrorist violence and civil wars, and millions of its inhabitants have been forced to flee their homes or even their countries.

In the western part of the area, the populations of former French colonies are striving to establish democratic nation-states with varying degrees of success, but with real results, and have made notable progress.

In contrast, it would appear that there has been little progress in the Central African territories. Chad, the Central African Republic, Gabon, and Cameroon are all languishing under the endless rule of dictatorships backed and supported by France.¹

¹ Tobner 2019.

The landlocked country of Chad, in the heart of the region, has always sought to be part of the chaos that surrounds it, but inside it is constantly dancing on the razor's edge. As one of the world's fastest-growing countries in terms of population, Chad's eventual direction in domestic politics will affect the fate of tens of millions of people. If the worst-case scenario is realised, the collapse of Chad, sandwiched between the Sudanese civil war in the east and the terrorist rule in the Western Sahel, could open a gateway allowing the free flow of terrorism, arms trafficking, and violence between the two chaotic regions.

The position on this side of the Atlantic Ocean has always been that Chad is a French concern. Paris's former colony continues to remain close to the colonial heartland, home to the largest French military presence on the continent, and now serves as a gathering place for the French Armed Forces retreating from other African countries. In a gesture of loyalty, France continues to confer legitimacy on successive Chadian military leaders.²

Since the creation of the sovereign state in 1960, there has been a continuous French military presence in Chad, which means that various groups, organisations, political formations, paramilitary, and even criminal factions have the support of France, depending on what is more in favour of the economic, political, or cultural interests of the former colonial power. We can conclude that the rule of the dictators of the last three decades could and can only be maintained by means of the French military presence and support.³

Numerous economic, geographical, political, and historical factors have led to this situation.

ECONOMY

In addition to strategic and political interests, France has, of course, economic ties and activities in the countries of the former colonial empire, including Chad. France has very important economic interests throughout the region: oil (Gabon, Republic of Congo, Gulf of Guinea), diamonds and uranium (Niger), cocoa and coffee (Ivory Coast), as well as banking, transport, and other services (water, communications) in both Western and Central African states.

In Francafrique, there are two types of so-called monetary unions, which allow France, even after the break-up of its colonial empire, to maintain a kind of protectorate over the countries that have gained independence. First, the CFA franc, printed by the French National Bank, is the official currency in many states of West and Central Africa, and second, member countries hold more than 50 percent of their central bank assets in the French Treasury. Africa accounts for between 0.25 and 0.5 percent of France's annual GDP growth and between nine and ten percent of French imports of raw materials.⁴

In the context of the continuing difficulties the world economy faces, it is important to maintain these links in order to preserve economic equilibrium. France needs to defend its positions against other ambitious countries seeking to penetrate the African continent, which are emerging as competitors in key areas such as finance, energy, infrastructure, telecommunications, and agriculture.⁵

² Powell 2021.

³ Hudson 2023.

⁴ WITS Data 2021.

⁵ Sztankai 2014.

The economic prestige of French companies in the business world of former African colonies has been steadily declining over the last few decades. China, Turkey, and Morocco are gaining more and more ground in the market.

CULTURE

When we talk about France's presence in Africa, we must not forget the cultural aspect. Francophonie is the pledge of the French cultural heritage on the African continent. The teaching and use of the French language in the allied countries is essential to gain and maintain sufficient economic and political influence. It is clear that the more French-speaking countries there are, the greater the chances are of building a stronger and wider diplomatic and economic network of alliances.⁶

French is the third most widely used language in the business environment and the fourth most used in the world of the internet.

The French-speaking universe is a fast-growing market. Francophonie currently has more than 320 million speakers, representing three percent of the world's total population, and 60 percent of French speakers live in Africa. This increased by 15 percent between 2018 and 2024, and by 2050, it will account for eight percent of the world's population, with 750 million people. This huge increase is explained by the demographic growth of the African population.⁷

GEOPOLITICS

France is a middle power in terms of its role in the world economy and world politics, but also a key player on the African continent. This role justifies the fact that when the UN Security Council discusses issues affecting the region, France is always an important participant in the negotiations and also justifies its permanent presence in the international community and the UN Security Council. In order to maintain this central role, France has an essential economic and geopolitical interest in sustaining its military presence and power on the continent.⁸

HISTORY

Since the end of the colonial regime in 1960, Chad has existed in the same form: under/ alongside French military occupation, which supports this or that faction according to its own interests, and helps the leaders of criminal gangs to power, who rule their people as dictators, while pursuing the aims of foreign backers. The current president, Mahamat Déby, who succeeded his father on the 'throne', and Idriss Déby, who came to power in the shadow of the sinister Hissène Habré, are both ruthless dictators who control their people through fear and violence.

These dictatorships have only survived thanks to France's military presence and support and to their success in putting down the rebellions and uprisings that have periodically sprung up to overthrow them.

⁶ Sztankai 2013.

⁷ Henni-Moulai 2023.

⁸ Chafer 2017.

The period following the independence of the African countries that had been French colonies is known by historians as the 'Françafrique'. The difficulties of this era were faced by both the former colonial and the newly independent countries. Despite all its efforts, France's influence seems to be waning, and its presence and importance in the political and economic spheres are steadily diminishing. For the awakening social forces and the new elite, France is the perfect scapegoat for all the problems, and is making great efforts to adapt to the situation and maintain its position in the region.⁹

CHRONOLOGY OF MILITARY INTERVENTIONS

Over the last four decades, France has intervened militarily mainly on the African continent, either under intergovernmental agreements or multilateral ones.

The first operation was launched in August 1983. In the framework of Operation Manta, some 4000 French troops arrived in Chad to support the regime of Chadian President Hissène Habré, who had previously been in power, in his fight against the Libyan-backed GUNT (Goukouni Oueddei's Transitional Government of National Unity).

A few months later in the same year, the Council of Ministers approved a 1100 million French franc contribution to finance military operations in Chad.

On the first anniversary of the launch of the operation, French Defence Minister Charles Hernu, stated in a radio interview that France would continue its campaign until the Libyans left the Chadian territories they had occupied 12 years earlier.

A month later, an agreement was signed between France and Libya to withdraw from the occupied territories. At the same time, Minister of Foreign Affairs Claude Cheysson stated that Chad would continue to benefit from French military support if Libya violated the accord.

In February 1986, following Libya's breach of the agreement and the resumption of fighting between the two African countries, the French air force launched an air raid on the Ouadi Doum airfield in northern Chad, which was a base of the Libyan forces. This is known as Operation Épervier.

At the end of 1990, French Defence Minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement and Jacques Pelletier, Minister of Cooperation and Development, announced the reinforcement of the Épervier military system and support for the newly appointed Head of State, Idriss Déby, and his efforts to democratise Chad. This included the arrival of a 450-strong military contingent as a backup to help the dictator in his fight against the supporters of the former president. As a second step, a paratrooper company was sent to N'Djamena at the end of February.¹⁰

After that, almost a decade and a half passed without any major French military intervention. In 2006, fighter aircraft of the French air force fired warning shots against the rebels, some 250 kilometres from N'Djamena. Two years later, there was a firefight between French service members and rebels to protect N'Djamena airport and evacuate French citizens.

In January 2013, Mali requested military assistance from the French state after Islamist armed groups seized the country's capital, Bamako. This operation began under the name of Serval, commanded by the French Armed Forces, and was renamed the well-known

⁹ Chafer 2002.

¹⁰ Ministère des Armées 2025.

Barkhane a year and a half later. The operation was initially a success. French and allied ground and air forces joined to support the Malian troops. The mission was later extended to the Sahel, with two permanent bases established in Chad and Niger.

The accumulated anti-French and anti-France sentiment over the years, the unsuccessful war against the insurgents, the rise to power of the Malian junta, the escalation of violence, and the deterioration of diplomatic relations between France and Mali resulted in the decision announced by President Macron in 2022 to withdraw the French Armed Forces from Mali (*Interventions de l'armée française en Afrique depuis 1981*).¹¹

The French Armed Forces' anti-terrorist campaign in Africa, which lasted for almost a decade, finally came to a definitive end in August 2022. In the two years since then, Operation Barkhane has been internationally and unequivocally described as a total failure, a colossal disaster of French policy.¹²

Since the military operations launched and carried out by France in the Algerian War of Independence, Chad's involvement has become the longest and most deadly foreign military engagement. It aimed to sustain the current Chadian regime to remain in power, yet it failed to prevent the fall of the bloodthirsty dictatorships of Tombalbaye (1975) and Hissène Habré (1990). It is also clearly evident that foreign military intervention in the internal affairs of another country cannot bring peace or political stability.

PRESENT SITUATION

Even after the declaration of independence of its last African colony, Djibouti, in 1977, France remained on the continent and intervened almost continuously in its internal affairs with a military presence and various actions.

Over the last two to three years, the French Armed Forces have been almost entirely squeezed out of Africa, with the number of troops stationed on the continent today (7 February 2025) reduced to just over 4000 in four bases: in Senegal (Dakar), Gabon (Libreville), Ivory Coast (Abidjan), and Djibouti.¹³

About a thousand of the French troops who were involved in Operation Barkhane and who were withdrawn from Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso by the end of 2023 with the support of the Wagner Group, are currently stationed in Chad at three bases. In Ivory Coast, Gabon, and Senegal, the number of personnel has been reduced to 350. However, because of its strategic location, occupied by Yemen's military activity in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the French base in Djibouti is not affected by the reduction. A contingent of around 1,500 troops will continue to be stationed there.

After Faya (26 December 2024) and Abeche (11 January 2025), the last French serviceman left the N'Djamena military base in Chad on 30 January 2025. This marked the end of the French army's 65-year involvement in the African country.¹⁴

¹¹ La Rédaction 2025.

¹² King 2023.

¹³ Faye 2024.

¹⁴ Molinić 2025.

PROSPECTS

The departure of French service members coincided with the end of the UN-led MINUSMA mission in Africa, giving way to the Wagner Group to support the work of the ruling military regimes. Thousands of Wagner mercenaries are believed to already be in the region, suggesting that Russia could quickly take on a role in the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of France. Most pessimistically, Russia's military presence and the tightening economic ties with China could even lead to a proxy war. Meanwhile, the destabilisation of the region could trigger a new migration crisis in Europe.¹⁵

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¹⁵ Kolozsi 2023.

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