

Regional Bloc's Niger Dilemma: What Russian Officials and Experts Say!

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The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the 15-member regional bloc, has declared fierce opposition to military's infiltration into politics and primarily eager to restore constitutional order. It shares the same position with the 54-member continental organization, the African Union.

United States and Europe, particularly France backed ECOWAS' collective decision to resolve it through peaceful mechanism, dialogue and diplomacy. Russian President Vladimir Putin, in a phone conversation held on August 15, with interim President of Mali, Assimi Goïta, according to media transcript of the Kremlin website.

In a statement, the Kremlin said the call was initiated by Mali, and was focused on ending the situation "through peaceful political and diplomatic means." There is a sharp contrast: Putin has called for a return to constitutional order in Niger, while Wagner PMC Founder Yevgeny Prigozhin has welcomed the army takeover and smartly offered his military services.

On the other hand, the West African military chiefs held a two-day meeting from August 17-18 in Ghana's capital, Accra, to coordinate a possible armed intervention to reverse a coup in the Republic of Niger. Alarmed by a series of military takeovers in the region, it has agreed to activate a "standby force to restore constitutional order" in Niger.

ECOWAS has requested Niger's coup leaders release President Mohamed Bazoum after his July 26 ouster, warning that the bloc could send in troops as a last resort if negotiations turn unsuccessful. Reports described the situation extremely sophisticated, therefore it is imperative for external actors and African States to engage in constructive dialogue in order to restore the expected stability in West Africa.

Dr. Abdel-Fatau Musah, Moscow State University's graduate and now the ECOWAS Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security at ECOWAS, however said the bloc

would to resort to the ultimate means of force. Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria are expected to contribute troops, but little detail has emerged over a potential Niger operation.

Russia and the United States have urged a diplomatic solution to the crisis. The regional bloc has already applied trade and financial sanctions while France, Germany and the United States have suspended aid programmes. The regional bloc's troops have previously intervened in other emergencies since 1990 including in wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. We have mentioned that Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria are expected to contribute troops, but little detail has emerged over a potential Niger operation.

Notwithstanding all that, Burkina Faso has joined voices with Mali and claimed that any intervention in Niger would be a declaration of war on Mali and Burkina Faso. In light of Russia's increasing influence in west Africa, it is worth noting that Burkina Faso itself had a coup in January 2022 and since then has requested France to fully withdraw its troops while hailing Russia as a strategic ally, thus increasing speculations about Russian presence and influence. In the same vein, Algeria, known for its strong loyalty to Russia, announced its opposition to any intervention in Niger.

With Russia's support for the emerging military power in the region, Burkina Faso and Mali showing the leeway and offer noticeable sign of encouragement for other to follow such steps aim at kicking out France. In the Russia-Africa summit joint declaration, Russia indicated, as one of its strategic objectives, unreserved and unflinching support for African States to deal drastically with growing United States and Western/European political influence and dominance across Africa.

It is well-known that Russia perceives Africa as an area where it can diminish Western influence by leveraging historical ties and fostering alliances with Africa. It has gained presence in Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea - these are French-speaking African States. And now in a close-connection to Niger, what are Russian officials and experts saying: We bring you here some of their arguable opinions and diverse positions monitored from local and foreign media.

Russia's Financial newspaper Izvestia was upbeat with some of the reports. France is behind the United States' move to join efforts aimed at resolving the situation in Niger as Paris is unwilling to forfeit its influence in the West African country, a source in the office of Russia's Honorary Consul in the Nigerien capital, Niamey told Izvestia media.

Washington is clearly seeking to reinstate President Mohamed Bazoum, toppled by the military in late July, in power. For Western nations, it is crucial to have loyal leaders at the helm of those countries that are rich in natural resources, experts noted. US Acting Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland has visited Niger. She met with representatives of the rebels but was unable to hold meetings with either ousted President Mohamed Bazoum or the coup's leader, General Abdourahamane Tchiani.

"Such a high-level visit sends a clear signal that the US is interested in preserving the previous political regime. It's a signal not only to Niger but also to its neighbors, who are undecided on how to react to the military coup," Grigory Yarygin, associate professor in the Department of American Studies at St. Petersburg State University, pointed out.

"If we look at the US policy and approach, we will see that the old idea of maintaining

control over developing countries for the sake of guaranteeing access to vital commodities is now back in vogue,” said Vladimir Vasilyev, Senior Research Fellow at the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute for United States and Canadian Studies.

According to him, the tactics that the United States applied after the European colonial system in Africa collapsed in the 1960s, which involved developing uneven market-based relations with economically underdeveloped countries by selling goods at prices favorable for Western countries, has failed to produce the desired results.

Additionally, developments of recent years, including sanctions on Moscow, the coronavirus pandemic and Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine, have significantly changed the logistics of transporting goods, thus leading to supply chain disruptions. The United States is increasingly seeking direct control over resources and political oversight of countries in general, which in large part explains the roots of Washington’s neo-colonial approach to foreign policy, Vasilyev noted.

Yarygin emphasized that Washington also had other concerns:

“If European players leave Africa, someone else will show up to fill the vacuum. Clearly, the US is wary that the void will be filled by either Chinese or Russian influence.”

According to Nikolay Shcherbakov, Senior Researcher at the Institute of Asian and African Studies, and Moscow State University and Professor at the Higher School of Economics (HSE University), currently the possibility of ECOWAS’ intervention in Niger remains, high but it would be a zero-sum game for all participants.

“The bloc will have to take measures in order not to lose face, but any potential military action would mean an armed conflict that nobody really needs. It would create a major disbalance in an already highly unstable region that is suffering from the actions of Jihadist groups,” he told Vedomosti.

Yevgeny Korendyasov, Senior Researcher at the Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, thinks that France will seek a solution only within the ECOWAS framework.

“First of all, the time has passed for this type of intervention; second, ECOWAS and other such integrative unions are guided by a strict provision that all conflicts should be resolved peacefully,” the expert told Izvestia.

French Public Law Professor Karine Bechet-Golovko, who is a visiting professor at Moscow State University, expressed confidence that Paris is losing its position in Africa because it lacks a clear-cut strategy in the region. France is following in line with the EU’s overall foreign policy, while Brussels announced on August 1 that it was ready to support a military operation against Niger given a relevant request by ECOWAS. She noted that France does not have an independent policy with respect to Africa, and therefore it has been pulling out of everywhere – Mali, Burkina Faso, and now Niger. The expert told Izvestia that this is a sad sign because a country that lacks sovereignty cannot be an independent player in foreign policy.

Pavel Timofeyev, Head of the European Political Research Department at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, noted that there is still no final decision with

regard to Niger. According to him, the French may resort to attempting a military intervention if it is backed by the United States.

“The Americans have no problems with getting troops there. Then, it would be an intervention by a coalition, not by a single country,” he pointed out. However, the expert stressed that France is more likely to try to avoid any military interference because Paris is concerned over the reputation damage that it would incur should it fail. Thus far, it is using economic restrictions, such as suspending all financial aid to neighboring Burkina Faso, the expert told Izvestia.

Financial & Business Vedomosti wrote that August 6 marked the deadline for the ultimatum that the member states of the regional group Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) issued to the leaders of Niger’s military coup, demanding that ousted President Mohamed Bazoum be reinstated in office. The organization announced at a summit in Nigeria that ECOWAS nations would take every measure to restore constitutional order in Niger.

On July 31, the Foreign Ministers of ECOWAS countries issued a joint statement, saying that Nigeria, Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire were ready to dispatch troops to Niger. However, the parliament of Nigeria refused to approve the proposed foreign intervention. Meanwhile, France, which imports 15% to 17% of the uranium it needs for its nuclear power industry from Niger, has actually backed the intervention plan. Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna stated that Paris resolutely supported ECOWAS’ efforts.

France is coordinating its actions with ECOWAS, said Grigory Lukyanov, an Expert at the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Asian and Eastern Studies. Paris does not want to lose its longstanding position in the region and a critical supplier of vital resources. Initially, the proposal was more for a purely special military operation in Niger, the expert added. However, the situation has become more complicated now that the Nigerien coup leader has secured the support of civilians in addition to the rebels’ base in the military.

The ECOWAS ultimatum was an attempt to intimidate Niger as the plan was not to carry out a full-scale intervention, Rakhimbek Bobokhonov, researcher at the Center for Civilizational and Regional Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute for African Studies, pointed out. ECOWAS simply does not have a mechanism for promptly assembling a military force and coordinating its deployment. For its part, Paris will attempt to preserve its military presence in Niger but French forces will have to leave the country eventually; it is just a matter of time, the analyst noted.

“Tensions in the region are rising but it’s difficult to talk about a full-scale military operation against Niger at this point. Every diplomatic effort is more likely to be made and there is also a possibility of minor armed clashes in border areas, as well as precision missile attacks and airstrikes on critical military facilities,” Alexander Rudoy, International Cooperation Expert at the State University of Management, told Izvestia. According to him, there should be no expectations of a quick resolution to the Niger crisis, while further developments will largely depend on whether the countries of the region are capable of agreeing to settle the issue peacefully.

Sanctions have already been imposed on Niger, and the country’s membership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was terminated.

“From the standpoint of Europe’s energy balance and the confrontation with Russia, this is an important country, especially in the long term. There is a French military contingent stationed there. There could be an attempt to intervene in order to safeguard it,” Andrey Maslov, Expert at the Valdai Discussion Club and Director of the Higher School of Economics (HSE University) Center for African Studies, told a local Russian newspaper.

Nikita Panin, Program Coordinator at the Russian International Affairs Council, and Researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute for African Studies, said:

“For ECOWAS, this is certainly another, and perhaps the most serious, challenge, because the chairmanship of this regional organization also changed less than a month ago. In any case, ECOWAS has already taken some measures: the borders with Niger have been closed, and all financial transactions with anyone associated with the putschists who took power have been prohibited.”

“Sanctions have already been announced against Niger, and its membership in the organization is likely to be suspended. Thus, a belt of states in political isolation and bordering on each other is forming in the Sahara-Sahel region: Guinea – Mali – Burkina Faso – Niger. Russia is interested in expanding relations with Niger, as well as with all other African States, and thus could help to normalize the situation there,” Vsevolod Sviridov, Expert at the HSE University Center for African Studies, told Izvestia.

The West’s unambiguous support for the agreement of the Member-States of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to launch a military operation in Niger indicates that the organization may intervene in favor of the colonialists, said Konstantin Kosachev, Deputy Speaker of Russia’s Federation Council (Upper House of Parliament or Senate).

In his opinion, the use of force could dramatically destabilize the situation in the region. “The West’s unambiguous support for ECOWAS actions against the rebels in Niger suggests that this economic union may actually intervene in favor of the colonialists. The use of force will not only fail to defuse tensions in Niger and the region, but on the contrary, will lead to its sharp destabilization,” Kosachev told TASS News Agency.

On the whole, he characterized the West African bloc’s announcement of its readiness to launch a military operation in Niger as soon as possible as a very alarming signal. “On the one hand, the general fatigue of local leaders from coups is easy to understand. In July, Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, the current head of ECOWAS, said he would not tolerate new military coups in a region where there have already been five of them in less than three years. On the other hand, external intervention is unlikely to solve the problems of either Niger or the region. It’s rather the other way round,” Kosachev said.

Attempts to settle the crisis in Niger militarily would only draw out the conflict and destabilize the Sahara and Sahel region, and Moscow supports the efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to mediate the situation, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on August 11.

“The ECOWAS is taking steps to restore constitutional order in Niger through a political and diplomatic dialogue with the new Nigerien authorities. Russia supports the ECOWAS’ mediation efforts aimed at searching for ways out of the crisis that was

created,” the Foreign Affairs Ministry’s website said.

At the same time, there has been information that the ECOWAS decided at its extraordinary summit in Abuja on August 10 to prepare and deploy its reserve forces, which could stage an armed incursion into Niger to free Mohamed Bazoum. The Nigerien military declared their readiness to fend off any foreign intervention. Moreover, they have announced the formation of a provisional government, which includes civil society representatives, according the statement.

“We believe that a military approach to settling the crisis in Niger risks leading to a protracted standoff in the African country and a sharp destabilization of the situation in the Sahara-Sahel region as a whole,” the Foreign Affairs Ministry’s website said.

Mohamed Bazoum’s election in 2021 was a landmark in Niger’s history, ushering in its first peaceful transfer of power since independence from France in 1960. Niger is a landlocked nation located in West Africa and well known to be a major uranium producer but has 80% impoverished population. Niger remains one of the poorest countries in the world, regularly ranking at the bottom of the UN’s Human Development Index.

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