

Declining Security Footprint of France in West Africa and Its Implication for Nigeria: A Commentary



Introduction

West Africa continues to face significant security threats, including terrorism, trafficking, and organized crime. The Sahel region, in particular, has seen a rise in jihadist groups such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, Islamic State West Africa Province and Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, affecting Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria. France has historically played a dominant role in the security affairs of its former colonies, maintaining a military presence across West Africa. However, widespread dissatisfaction with its policies has led to the expulsion of French forces from several countries, including Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Senegal, and Ivory Coast.

France's military interventions were initially aimed at peacekeeping, intelligence gathering, and counterterrorism, yet critics argue that its presence was more about maintaining political influence and protecting its economic interests. The 2023 pledge by President Emmanuel Macron to reduce the French troop presence did little to appease West African leaders, who increasingly sought alternative security partners. The military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger further underscored the changing regional dynamics, with these nations forming the Association of Sahelian States (AES) and shifting alliances towards Russia and Middle Eastern nations.

Security Vacuum and the Shift in Alliances

The withdrawal of French and Western forces has created a security vacuum, leading some West



African states to forge new alliances. The ruling juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have turned to Russia's Wagner Group for security assistance, despite concerns over human rights abuses and resource exploitation. Niger's decision to expel U.S. troops and terminate its long-standing defense arrangement with Washington further highlights the region's move away from Western military

cooperation. Similarly, Chad and Senegal have strengthened ties with Middle Eastern and Asian nations, while Niger has sought partnerships with Russia and Iran, particularly concerning its uranium reserves. Hungary has also extended military aid to Chad, indicating the region's evolving security landscape. The rejection of Western-backed initiatives, including the ECOWAS security framework, signifies a shift towards non-traditional alliances, with long-term implications for regional stability.

Implications for Nigeria

Nigeria, as the largest economy in the region, faces heightened security risks from the deteriorating situation in the Sahel. The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS weakens regional counterterrorism coordination, potentially allowing extremist groups to expand their influence along Nigeria's borders. The continued presence of Boko Haram and ISWAP in northern Nigeria could be exacerbated by the instability in neighboring states. Furthermore, the reliance of regional actors on Russian military assistance raises concerns about the effectiveness of counterterrorism strategies, as the Wagner Group has been accused of prioritizing regime protection over civilian security. The absence of a coordinated regional approach to combating terrorism makes Nigeria more vulnerable to cross-border threats, necessitating stronger security cooperation with both regional and global partners.

Nigeria has an opportunity to play a diplomatic role in bridging the gap between France and its former allies. Strengthening its engagement with West African nations and fostering new security partnerships will be essential in mitigating the threats posed by the shifting geopolitical landscape. Additionally, investing in border security measures and intelligence-sharing mechanisms will be crucial in preventing further instability from spilling into Nigerian territory.

Conclusion

The decline of France's security role in West Africa has triggered a realignment of military and diplomatic relationships, with countries increasingly seeking alternative security partners. While some view the expulsion of French troops as a step toward sovereignty, the resulting security vacuum poses significant challenges for the region. Nigeria must proactively engage with both

West African and global actors to ensure regional stability. Strengthening military capabilities, fostering regional cooperation, and reassessing diplomatic strategies will be key to navigating the evolving security environment in West Africa.



Author: Olumayowa O. Albert. Research Fellow II at the Gen. LEO Irabor Early Warning Systems Centre (GLIC) of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), Lagos, Nigeria.
Contact: o.albert@niia.gov.ng
March, 2025.