

The Motives of French and American Intervention in West Africa -The State of Niger, a Case Study

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Abstract:

The study aims to identify the motives of French and United States intervention in West Africa; the state of Niger as a case study. The study adopted the descriptive analytical method, where the study relied on many related literature and studies to Identify French interests in the West Africa region, the factors of French and United States intervention in West Africa, and the Repercussions of the French and United States withdrawal from Niger. After analyzing the literature related to the subject of the current study, a set of results were produced. The results showed that the relationships between France and the West African countries encompass various dimensions, including military, economic, and cultural. It has been revealed that both France and the United States have maintained a strong influence over extended periods in this region through diverse policies.

Keywords: French Intervention, United States Intervention, West Africa, the State of Niger.

دوافع التدخل الفرنسي والأميركي في غرب أفريقيا - دولة النيجر، دراسة حالة

الملخص

هدفت الدراسة إلى التعرف على دوافع التدخل الفرنسي والأميركي في غرب أفريقيا؛ وذلك من خلال دراسة حالة لدولة النيجر. اعتمدت الدراسة على العديد من الأدبيات والدراسات السابقة ذات العلاقة بموضوع الدراسة الحالية من أجل التعرف على المصالح الفرنسية في منطقة غرب أفريقيا ومنطقة النيجر تحديداً، وعوامل التدخل الفرنسي والأميركي في غرب أفريقيا، وتداعيات الانسحاب الفرنسي والأميركي من النيجر. وبعد تحليل الأدبيات والدراسات المتعلقة بموضوع الدراسة الحالية، تم التوصل إلى مجموعة من النتائج، أهمها أن العلاقات بين فرنسا ودول غرب أفريقيا تشمل أبعاداً مختلفة منها العسكرية والاقتصادية والثقافية، كما وأظهرت النتائج أن كلاً من فرنسا والولايات المتحدة حافظتا على نفوذ قوي على مدى فترات طويلة في هذه المنطقة من خلال سياسات متنوعة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التدخل الفرنسي، التدخل الأميركي، غرب أفريقيا، دولة النيجر.

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1. Introduction:

In the old days of colonialism, France established itself as a major colonial empire in West Africa. French historians refer to this empire in French history as the First Empire. It figured prominently in 1763 when France was forced to cede Canada and India to England in the Treaty of Paris ^(*)¹. Many historians see exploration and colonization as two sides of the same coin. They concluded this from the result that geographical discoveries in Africa led to at the end of the nineteenth century, which was the fall of most of the African lands under the name of colonialism (Abdul-El-Hadi & Lahli 2022).

France is considered one of the European countries that managed (in the first half of the 1990s) to maintain strong ties with its former African colonies. France was the first country in this field compared to other colonial powers (Britain, Italy, Portugal), as it succeeded in attaining this distinguished position in its African relations due to a well-defined and precise cooperative policy implemented in some West African countries in various fields (military, economic, cultural). This policy had important foundations aimed at preserving its influential role in global politics, especially during the Cold War era (Elchime 2023).

On the other hand, observers of French African policy notice that there are developments threatening the stability of French influence on the continent. These developments have various causes, some of which are the result of international changes and the dominance of the new world order characterized by the dominance of the unipolar system. Others have come about due to changes in local African conditions. Additionally, some of these developments are a consequence of adapting to the alterations that took place within French domestic policy in the context of these international changes (Nelson 2016).

As seen in other colonial powers, France continued its connections with its ex-colonies during the post-colonial era. In reality, France's economic structure was molded around the dynamic of exploiters and the exploited. Typically, the colonies functioned as nations that supplied raw materials without playing a central role in critical production processes. This

^(*) The Treaty of Paris of 1763 ended the French and Indian War/Seven Years' War between Great Britain and France, as well as their respective allies. In the terms of the treaty, France gave up all its territories in mainland North America, effectively ending any foreign military threat to the British colonies there. **Refer:** The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration from the website <https://www.archives.gov/>.

dynamic favored capitalist states like France, as even after gaining independence, these former colonies were viewed as potential markets (Atamer 2022).

2. Problem Statement:

Despite different historical backgrounds of French and United States, and geopolitical contexts, both nations have shown significant interest in the region. This research seeks to analyze how historical legacies, strategic and geopolitical interests, economic motivations, and political and ideological factors drive French and United States actions in Niger. By examining these aspects, the study will provide a comprehensive understanding of the distinct and overlapping reasons behind their interventions and the implications for Niger and West African region in general. In general, the problem statement lies in the following question: What are the Motives of French and United States Intervention in West Africa?

3. The Study Questions:

Based on the problem statement, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the French interests in the West Africa region?
- What are the French and United States interests in West Africa?
- What are the factors of French and United States intervention in West Africa?
- What are the French and United States interests in West Africa and Niger?
- What are the Repercussions of the French withdrawal from Niger?

4. The Study Significant:

The current study has both scientific and practical Significance, as shown below:

Scientific Significance: The study contributes to understanding the geopolitical strategies and post-colonial dynamics in West Africa. By comparing French and American interventions, it provides insights into the complexities of contemporary foreign policies and enriches academic discourse on international relations and neocolonialism.

Practical Significance: The study informs policymakers in Niger and West Africa on strategic responses to foreign interventions. It helps international organizations design context-sensitive programs and guides France and the U.S. in shaping

more effective and transparent foreign policies, promoting regional stability and development.

5. The Study objectives:

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- Identifying French interests in the West Africa region.
- Identifying French and United States interests in West Africa
- Identify the factors of French and United States intervention in West Africa.
- Identify the French and United States interests in West Africa and Niger.
- Identify French and United States withdrawal from Niger.
- Identify the Repercussions of the French withdrawal from Niger.

6. Methodology:

This study falls within the realm of descriptive analytical studies that aim to describe and analyze frameworks in addition to comparative case study method focusing on specific instances of intervention.

7. The Study limitations:

Objectivity limitations: The study addresses the following title: "The Motives of French and United States Intervention in West Africa"

Temporal limitations: The current study was conducted in 2024.

Spatial limitations: The current study is a case study on the State of Niger.

8. Literature Review:

The Literature Review addresses the literature and topics related to the current study, where various research, books, and references were consulted to obtain the necessary data and reach the results.

8.1 French interests in the West African region:

French interests determined the foundations and mechanisms of the policy that France implemented in Africa. These interests were branched out to cover three basic areas: (Political

and diplomatic interests, strategic interests, and military interests (Elchime 2023).

In terms of strategic interests, France has sought to control some strategic locations in West Africa, giving France a high strategic advantage (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2019). In addition, France sought to control the West African region to limit political Islam, which has been on the rise since the 1990s. The percentage of Muslims is high in regions of Africa, which constitutes a suitable environment for the spread of political Islam. Here, France's goal became to establish a protective border on the coast of the Sahara Africa to prevent the spread of political Islam to the south. France is seeking this matter based on its presence in the countries of West and Central Africa, and its alliance with African leaders (Dowd & Raleigh 2013).

With regard to political and diplomatic interests, one of the main goals that France seeks to achieve in West Africa is to maintain the stability of African regimes. In light of the decline in stability and the possibility of the outbreak of civil wars, France prefers to support strong existing regimes, despite their drawbacks, rather than encourage new regimes that do not yet know the extent of their capabilities to control their people. This stability leads to the prosperity of French investments in the continent (Taylor 2015). In addition, the strong multiple relations between France and African countries also provide broad African diplomatic support for France in the United Nations. This allows it to maintain its position in the Security Council as a major permanent member state (Abderrahmane 2017). As for military interests, they are mainly represented in military bases, which on the African continent represent one of the most important areas of competition between countries of the world (Elchime 2023).

France also has other economic interests in the West Africa region and the African continent in general. Among those interests is intra-trade between France and the majority of the countries of West and Central Africa, as France is making persistent attempts to continue these relations and ensure that its distinguished position remains there (Gagne 2020). In addition, there are French investments in Africa and West Africa. French capital is still one of the most important foreign investments in many West African countries (Ibrahim 2020). There is also the French franc area; 16 countries from West and Central Africa are linked to the French franc zone, which allows more than ninety million Africans to deal in the French franc (Elchime 2023).

8.2 The Factors of French and United States Intervention in West Africa:

The coastal West African countries are exposed to the risk of political instability, sectarian and criminal violence, armed conflicts, and their economies are unable to meet the collective needs of the population. This prompted major powers, led by the United States and France, to intervene in the affairs of these countries by exploiting their unfavorable conditions with the aim of creating opportunities for development and improvement. The challenges and conditions faced by the African coastal countries have become attractive factors for countries like the United States and France to exploit their resources, achieving economic development and enhancing their presence in the region (Silla 2022).

In the decades following the Cold War, many African countries were vulnerable to foreign political and military intervention from Europe and the United States. Neighboring countries, regional and sub-regional organizations, as well as international networks, intervened in their affairs and supported both war-making and peace-building efforts. Two new models replaced the Cold War model, used as a justification for intervention,: first, responding to instability and the resulting responsibility to protect civilian lives, and second, the war against terrorism. Legitimacy was conferred upon the majority of externally driven actions as responses to instability (Schmidt 2018).

In general, the United States and France base their stance on intervention in the affairs of West African countries on a common set of main factors, as outlined by Richmond (Richmond 2013):

Economic Factors: The most significant motivation for U.S. intervention in Africa has been oil, alongside other natural resources and wealth. The establishment of a trade partnership between the intervening state and the African country during the early stages of prosperity, if successfully maintained, would prove to be a highly profitable venture.

Ideological Factors: The Cold War was a battle of ideas, where conflicting ideologies between the superpowers led to the search for political support, the creation of allies, and the enhancement of international backing. Preventing the spread of communism became a primary goal of U.S. foreign policy, and the ideological element of interventions in Africa was openly considered at least as a primary objective.

Strategic Factors: Strategic factors are closely tied to economic considerations, as the economic benefit from West African countries is achieved by establishing a tangible presence and control over these nations. This is done through the creation of military bases in the countries and exerting influence over their political decisions and administration.

Humanitarian Factors: The challenges and poverty faced by African countries in general, and West African countries in particular, as well as the emergence of some armed groups with the state's inability to control them, have served as a pretext for major powers to intervene in these countries under the guise of aiming to bring peace and security. This is often achieved through military presence in those nations.

One of France's main objectives, presented, as a justification for intervention in West African countries, was to establish preventive boundaries along the African Sahel to prevent the spread of extremist political Islamic groups towards the south. France pursues this goal based on its presence in West and Central African countries and its alliance with African leaders (Dowd & Raleigh 2013).

8.3 The French and United States Interests in West Africa and Niger:

First, the French Interests in West Africa and Niger:

During the first half of the 20th century, France stands out as one of the European countries that successfully maintained strong ties with its former African colonies. It took the lead in this regard compared to other colonial powers such as Britain, Italy, and Portugal. France achieved this prominent position in its African relations through a specific and precise cooperative policy implemented by some West African countries in various fields: military, economic, and cultural. This policy was based on a strategic foundation aimed at preserving its influential role in global politics, especially during the Cold War period (Elchime 2023).

France's policy in Africa is centered on an expansive notion of security that goes beyond political and military dimensions to include other forms of security, such as addressing basic needs, the right to a sustainable environment, and the protection of cultural, religious, and identity heritage. This is the approach adopted by French security policy in the African Sahel region, which is not solely military-focused. It has been developed through various means categorized into four main areas: military bases, bilateral cooperation with local armies, Special Forces, and financial assistance (Medessoukou 2018).

France had a distinct colonial policy in Africa, developing a strategy of cultural and political assimilation towards its colonies on the continent. The primary goals of France's assimilation policy in Africa were to exploit the continent and enhance France's international standing. However, this policy did not respect African cultures and traditions, as France imposed restrictions on African languages, culture, and identity. More importantly, the French regarded the colonial territories as integral parts of France, leading to the imposition of French culture on Africa (Siradağ 2014).

In Niger, one of the political and diplomatic objectives that France seeks to achieve is the preservation of stability in African regimes. This involves supporting existing strong regimes, despite their drawbacks, instead of encouraging new regimes whose ability to control their populations' remains uncertain in the face of declining stability and the potential for civil wars. This stability contributes to the flourishing of French investments in the African continent and Niger (Cohen 2022).

Despite France continuing to articulate the reasons for deploying its forces in Niger to assist in combating insecurity in the Sahel region, after numerous years, security deficiencies, tensions, and violence persist. Consequently, this has led to a lack of development and deterioration of economic conditions in the country. This situation has contributed to the growth of anti-French sentiments among the people, not only in Niger but also in neighboring countries like Mali and Burkina Faso (Yiadom 2023).

In general, France's interests in Niger, include maintaining political stability and supporting existing regimes to safeguard its investments. The historical assimilation policy has influenced French cultural imposition on the region. The deployment of French forces aims to combat insecurity in the Sahel, but persistent challenges have led to anti-French sentiments among the local population, influencing regional relations. Despite these complexities, France continues to play a significant role in the political and economic dynamics of West Africa.

Second, the United States Interests in West Africa and Niger:

As for the United States, the initial signs of its interest in Africa date back to the late 1950s through a visit by then-Vice President Richard Nixon to several African countries in 1957. This visit marked a qualitative shift in U.S. policy towards Africa, emphasizing the continent's vital role in international relations (Bin AL Shiekh 2018).

Nixon outlined two key objectives in the U.S. strategy towards Africa: containing the spread of communism and rejecting any exclusionary situation at the expense of traditional colonial powers. In 1992, U.S. interest in expanding strategic engagement in Africa, specifically in the Sahel region, became evident after various visits over the decades, including Roosevelt's visit to Gambia in 1943 and President Carter's unofficial visit to Liberia and Nigeria in 1992, followed by two tours by President Clinton (Bin AL Shiekh 2018).

The United States recognized the importance of the African continent by relying on influential countries to enhance United States continental influence, especially after the discovery of significant oil reserves in the Gulf of Guinea and West Africa in 2000, with over 25 oil fields identified. In addition to oil, the region possesses other valuable natural resources like gas, uranium, and gold. These factors prompted the United States to fully engage in the region, negatively influencing French presence and influencing United States interests to serve and advance in the area, thus diminishing French influence (Elchime 2023).

In 2002, the United States began funding programs in West African countries to assist them in building their capabilities for exercising sovereignty and controlling their borders. Between 2002 and 2004, the U.S. military trained and equipped rapid response units, each consisting of around 150 soldiers, in Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad. This effort aimed to enhance border capabilities against weapons trafficking, drug trade, and the movement of violence from transnational extremist organizations (Burgess 2019).

In 2013, after two years of discussions with the government, the United States expanded drone operations in the central Sahel region from a base in Niamey, Niger. An undisclosed number of drones and 100 military personnel were stationed in Niger, with the goal of "enhancing regional stability to support U.S. diplomacy and national security and to strengthen relations with regional leaders committed to security and prosperity" (Kurpershoek, Valdez & Zwijnenburg 2021).

Therefore, the combination of forces involved in Operation Barkhane, the Takuba Force, United States and European military presence in Agadez (Niger), European Union training missions in the Sahel, the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel, and the multidimensional United Nations Integrated Mission indicates a declared goal of achieving stability in the region. Strengthening partnerships with 17 African countries suggests a potential and significant shift in security governance in West Africa. This transformation raises questions about the relevance of the

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in security matters (Charbonneau 2021).

Moreover, the United States operates its second-largest base in Africa, known as Air Base 201, near the city of Agadez in northern Niger. This base is utilized for conducting drone operations both within Niger and beyond. Additionally, the United States manages its operations from a base near the capital of Niger, Niamey (Hernandez 2023).

Some argue that U.S. military assistance and intervention in Niger are related to the positive and negative performance in other countries regarding respect for human rights. In addition to protecting human rights, the U.S. government claims to work towards promoting democratic values and beliefs, along with implementing counter-terrorism measures worldwide (Choi & James 2016).

8.4 French and United States Withdrawal from Niger:

Since 2022, France has faced rejection from various segments of African populations against maintaining large military bases in some of its former colonies. The French military presence has been viewed as an extension of French colonialism aimed at securing French interests primarily, at the expense of supporting development and progress efforts in those countries (Helmi 2023).

Meanwhile, Niger was being used as a base for United States and French operations against extremist terrorist groups. The country was under the leadership of Mohamed Bazoum, who was elected president in the first democratic elections in 2021 (Aliyev 2023), until he was ousted in a military coup on July 26, 2023.

The coup in Niger on July 26, 2023, dealt a significant blow to the French military strategy in the Sahel region. This occurred a year after the withdrawal of French Operation Barkhane troops from Mali and six months after the withdrawal of French Special Forces from Burkina Faso. The coup raises questions about the future of French military presence in the region, as France faces more challenging decisions following its removal from Mali in 2022 and Burkina Faso in 2023 (Helmi 2023).

In late August 2023, the coup leaders in Niger considered the French ambassador "persona non grata" and demanded his departure within 48 hours. This decision was a response to France's rejection of the coup and its refusal to recognize the new authorities. Despite

pressure, including sanctions imposed by the “ECOWAS group”^(*) and the threat of military intervention, calls for the use of force to restore constitutional order in Niger diminished within ECOWAS. This diplomatic preference left France and ECOWAS somewhat isolated internationally, particularly as the operation lacked support from the UN Security Council, with the possibility of Moscow and Beijing exercising their veto power (Abu Najm 2023).

Perhaps France was convinced that it could not rely on the possibility of intervention by ECOWAS forces, led by the main state (Nigeria), to reinstate the ousted president, as Nigeria itself faces security challenges from the "Boko Haram" group and the ISIS faction in West Africa (Al-Saqqaf 2024).

If the United States, like France, does not recognize the legitimacy of the military regime in Niger, it has not described what happened in Niger as a military coup. Unlike France, the United States refrains from such a characterization to avoid legal obligations under U.S. law, which would require suspending all military relations with Niger, including the impact on its airbase and the \$100 million investment in the surveillance of the African coast in Agadez (Al-Saqqaf 2024).

In light of the revolution, the United States has suspended some aid programs to Niger, including funding for education, international military training, and programs supporting Niger's capabilities in counterterrorism. The revolution in Niger has raised questions about whether the United States can continue its military presence in the country, which officials and analysts say was crucial for combating Islamist extremists in the Sahel region (Yabi 2023).

8.5 Repercussions of the French Withdrawal from Niger:

On September 24, 2023, France announced its decision to end its military presence in Niger by the end of 2023, following pressures that led to its withdrawal. This withdrawal resulted in France losing most of its influence in West Africa and the collapse of the joint defense alliance it established in 2014 with the Sahel Five Group, including Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

France also lost access to energy and natural resources after withdrawing from Niger. This includes Nigerian gas, which fulfilled a significant portion of France's natural gas needs.

^(*) The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a governmental African organization, abbreviated as "ECOWAS," bringing together 15 countries from West Africa. It has adopted the motto of enhancing economic cooperation and trade exchange among the region's countries as a gateway to comprehensive economic integration.

Additionally, the halt in uranium exports from Niger to France negatively affected the efficiency of French nuclear reactors, supplying 70% of France's electricity needs, with Niger providing 18% of the necessary uranium. Strategically, Paris lost a significant foothold in West African Sahel countries by withdrawing from Niger, terminating the presence of French forces in five military bases in the country (Helmi 2023).

On the other hand, despite the negative impacts of the coup in Niger, it held greater significance for several reasons as showed by Aliyev (Aliyev 2023):

Firstly, Niger is important as it serves the geopolitical interests of the Western bloc, especially the United States and France.

Secondly, a new field of competition emerged that threatened United States and French interests in Niger, following Russia's entry into Africa, bringing unconventional military and economic resources to the region through private military companies, notably Wagner.

Thirdly, Niger's natural resources, particularly its uranium reserves, became an attractive factor for investment motivations for several major nations.

It appears that France lost both bets; it could not reinstate the legitimate president to power, nor could it maintain its military bases for counterterrorism efforts. Once again, similar to its experiences in Mali and Burkina Faso, France is compelled to seek another location to relocate its forces, with Chad being a likely candidate.

Therefore, all these factors have placed this seemingly "ordinary" African country on the world's agenda, creating a debate about whether a new battleground between the Western bloc and Russia might emerge in Niger. The military coup in Niger has turned into an opportunity that can be exploited to pursue various interests (Signé & Pita 2023).

The success of the military leadership in Niger in mobilizing the masses, particularly the youth, against France has granted it broad popular support in the country. Additionally, the announcement of the establishment of the "Sahel Alliance" on September 16, 2023, by Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso has further solidified their cooperation. The alliance emphasizes solidarity among the three nations in the face of any aggression on their territories, treating such an attack as a declaration of war against all of them.

9. Conclusion:

The relationships between France and the West African countries encompass various dimensions, including military, economic, and cultural. It has been revealed that both France and the United States have maintained a strong influence over extended periods in this region through diverse policies, as follows:

1. The French military presence in the region, under the pretext of maintaining security and countering terrorist threats, reflects France's strategy to assert its influence and dominance in African countries.
2. Emphasizing the enhancement of logistical infrastructure and the presence of Special Forces indicates France's focus on military capabilities and rapid impact.
3. France and the United States failed to address issues of corruption and administrative control inadequacies.
4. France's policy of cultural assimilation in Africa, which may have diminished the importance of African culture and identity.
5. Supporting existing regimes, even with shortcomings, to maintain agreements and uphold French and United States influence in the region, preserving the historical interaction of the United States and France with Africa and focusing on their strategic and economic interests.
6. The French withdrawal from Niger at the end of 2023 was due to France's rejection of the coup in Niger, which led to the expulsion of the French ambassador from Niger. The new military leadership succeeded in mobilizing the masses, and some African populations opposed France retaining military bases, viewing it as an extension of previous French occupation.
7. The French withdrawal from Niger resulted in the loss of French influence in the region and the collapse of the defense alliance established in 2014.
8. The withdrawal affected France's energy supplies, especially with the loss of gas and uranium sources.
9. In contrast to the French withdrawal, the United States continued to maintain its military presence in the region.

10. The security vacuum resulting from the withdrawals is reshaping power dynamics in the region, with increasing international competition and the emergence of a new area of competition with Russia, which began transferring its military and economic resources to the region.

Recommendations:

Depending on results the study reaches the following recommendations:

- Both France and the United States should consider a strategic reassessment of their military presence. This includes shifting from a predominantly military approach to one that incorporates comprehensive security sector reform and capacity-building for local forces.
- Emphasize collaboration with regional organizations like the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to ensure a multilateral approach to security.
- Invest in dual-use infrastructure that benefits civilian needs. Improved roads, communications, and logistics can enhance both security and economic development.
- Encourage public-private partnerships to build sustainable and resilient infrastructure projects.
- Shift from cultural assimilation policies to cultural preservation and promotion. Support local cultural initiatives, languages, and heritage projects to bolster national identities.
- Facilitate cultural exchanges that promote mutual understanding and respect for African cultural diversity.
- Adopt a policy of conditional engagement with regimes, where support is linked to progress in democratic governance, human rights, and anti-corruption measures.
- Promote inclusive political dialogues and support mechanisms for peaceful transitions of power.

- Post-Withdrawal Strategy: France should engage in diplomatic efforts to rebuild trust and redefine its role in the region through non-military means, such as economic partnerships, educational exchanges, and healthcare initiatives.
- Address the socio-political grievances that led to the anti-French sentiment, possibly through an apology or acknowledgment of past mistakes and a commitment to future cooperation based on equality and respect.
- The U.S. should balance its military presence with significant investments in economic development, health, education, and democratic governance.
- Promote regional stability through multilateral frameworks and support for regional security initiatives.
- Collaborate with international partners, including the EU and the UN, to fill the security vacuum left by the French withdrawal with a focus on stabilization and peacekeeping missions.
- Monitor the influence of external actors like Russia and China, ensuring that any engagement with these powers aligns with the principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and mutual benefit for African nations.

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