

Procurement by Proxy: How Sahelian Juntas acquire Equipment from Ousted Security Partners

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During the past two years military juntas in Mali and Niger have ousted three multilateral security missions in addition to French, and more recently American, forces deployed to fight jihadists in the two countries. Although being preceded by deteriorating relations, the decisions to kick out the international partners have been announced abruptly and the departures have been rushed as juntas have increased pressure for the missions to leave. After making the decision to oust the missions, the juntas have also mounted new obstacles for the missions and their departures, either taking, or forcing the missions to leave a large amount of equipment and material behind. This article argues that this is a deliberate strategy by the military juntas in Mali and Niger to acquire new equipment and material for their security forces, in some cases to be used with new security partners, such as Russia.

During the past three years, military juntas have taken power in four different Sahelian states: Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso and Niger. Two of these states have experienced coups within coups, meaning that they have had a second coup before any constitutional government has been reestablished. Hence, with six successful coups in less than three years, the Sahel region has exemplified the idea of ‘contagious coups’ or a ‘[coup epidemics](#)’, affecting the continent more broadly. The military juntas’ arrivals in power have led to interrelated shifts across several of the states: a shift in governance [towards a more authoritarian rule](#) with less space for human rights and freedom of expression exemplified by [violent crackdown on demonstrations](#) and the suspension of media outlets. A shift in the fight against non-state armed groups with

deliberate decisions to [sidestep international rules regarding armed conflict](#) aimed at protecting civilians and upholding international law. This has in turn been made possible by a [shift in security partners](#), from multilateral organizations and Western partners to Russian forces and an increased military collaboration between the three juntas in a [newly created defence alliance](#).

This article starts out by analysing and contextualizing the demands for departures by the juntas, before exploring the actual departures by MINUSMA and EUCAP Sahel Niger. The conclusion argues that these examples illustrate the unpredictability of collaborating with military governments who have come to power by bypassing rules and regulations and raises further questions regarding security force assistance more broadly, including how to ensure that missions do not involuntarily become ‘procurement proxies’, unintentionally providing equipment to rivals in a current global power competition.

DEMANDS FOR DEPARTURES WITHOUT DELAY

French forces were ousted in three of the four Sahelian states that experienced coups since 2020, and in both Mali and Niger international operations were asked to withdraw following a period of deteriorating relations. In Mali, after political relations unravelled between French authorities and the Malian junta at the start of 2022, the departure of the 5,000 troops strong French counter-terrorism operation Barkhane and Task Force Takuba was announced in February by President Macron. [The decision to withdraw was taken following an increasingly difficult collaboration](#), tainted by several incidents, including the forced departure of Danish troops for Task Force

Takuba and the [expulsion of the French ambassador](#) by the Malian transitional authorities. Thus, while the Malian junta had implicitly pushed for the departure by a series of obstructions and reinterpretations of previous agreements, it still claimed that the withdrawal signified a violation of the military accords between France and Mali and asked for a [‘departure without delay’](#) which the French negotiated to a six-month withdrawal timeline. A [logistical nightmare](#) ensued as French troops were forced to close several bases and repatriate tons of material before the end of the summer in 2022, but according to French official sources, the withdrawal was done in an [orderly and structured manner](#). Yet, all defensive bases and infrastructure built by the French during the past 9 years were handed over to the Malians.

The UN’s mission in Mali, MINUSMA, faced a more difficult operational environment after Barkhane left as the junta prohibited the latter from continuing to provide certain logistical support to the UN mission after its departure. In addition, both the mission’s political and operational space were severely constrained by the [imposition of different obstructions by the junta](#). Examples include how the junta established major no-fly zones for UN aircrafts covering almost half the country in January 2022 and later required a 48 to 72 hours’ notice for MINUSMA flights, which severely limited the mission’s possibility to carry out its mandate as a large [part of the flight requests were either denied or left without a response](#) from the Malian authorities.

A particularly difficult episode occurred in April 2022, when the transitional authorities also [restricted access for UN Human Rights investigators](#) to visit Moura, a village where a massacre took place over several days in March 2022 during an alleged counter terrorist operation. Over a year later, the [UN finally released a report](#) asserting that more than 500 people had been killed by the Malian army and ‘foreign troops’, most likely from the Wagner group. The report preceded Mali’s Foreign Minister’s demand, a month later, that the UN mission should leave ‘without delay’. The unprecedented situation whereby the *de facto*, yet, not the *de jure* authorities in a host state asked for the UN’s withdrawal, left the [UN in a](#)

[difficult position with a limited number of options](#). In the end, it was forced to set a problematic precedent withdrawing the mission in accordance with the junta’s demand. The UN’s departure entailed [closing 9 bases](#) in six months in addition to repatriating equipment, material and personnel in a rapidly deteriorating security context, posing new risks to the peacekeepers, an issue which will be further explored below.

In neighbouring Niger, the new junta decided to suspend military collaboration with France within a week after taking power, [requesting they withdraw their 1,500 troops within a month](#). After five weeks of mounting tensions between the two countries, France entered negotiations with the transitional authorities and another rapid withdrawal process began in the beginning of October. Convoys to neighbouring Chad and to the ports in Cotonou were organized and by the [end of December the last French troops left the country](#) while the French embassy was closed. Again, the French authorities reported that the withdrawal had taken place in an orderly and structured way, and again they left the defensive bases and infrastructure to the host authorities. Before the last French troops had left the country however, the junta decided to dispose of another external mission: EUCAP Sahel Niger.

The civilian EU CSDP mission had been present in Niger for more than 11 years when the Nigerien junta decided to oust it together with the recently deployed and suspended military operation, EUMPM, in December 2023. The junta’s announcement of the [end of the two missions](#) coincided with a visit to the country by the Russian deputy minister of Defence and was therefore perceived as a highly symbolic shift of security partners by observers. Just a week before the suspension, the [junta revoked a 2015 law enacted to curb the smuggling](#) of migrants from Africa via Niger to Europe, a law which the EU had been instrumental in setting up and supporting. The revocation of the law was seen as another show of force by the junta, keen to emphasize a shift in the balance of power between internal and external actors, and to punish the EU for imposing sanctions on the country. Still, while the decision to oust the long-term EU mission was not

completely unexpected, the fact that it was announced without any prior negotiations with EU officials, made it yet another abrupt ousting of an external mission.

On the 16th of March 2024, another Western security partner was expelled from Niger as the junta declared that the 2012 military agreement between the US and Niger was “illegal and violates all constitutional rules”. It remains unclear if the irony was intended by the military authorities who less than a year before suspended the constitution and took power illegally. The interruption of the agreement came after a high-level delegation from the US including the Assistant Secretary State for African Affairs and the head of US Africa Command General Michael Langley visited Niamey and met with several junta members, although in spite of extending their stay with an extra day, General Tchiani, the head of the junta, snubbed the delegation. In their statement, the Niger junta regretted that the US delegation did not let the Nigerien people choose their partners to fight against terrorism, making a not so subtle reference to Niger’s intensified collaboration with Russia and Iran and the US’ explicit efforts to prevent the entry of Russian troops. The decision to oust the US was a volte-face from the junta whose Prime Minister only three months declared that the US represented a historical security partner who remained welcome in Niger.

LEAVE IT ALL BEHIND: OBSTRUCTING DEPARTURES AND PROCURING EQUIPMENT

The Malian and Niger juntas introduced new types of obstructions for the missions and the personnel after demanding departures from the international missions, MINUSMA and EUCAP Sahel Niger. The impediments and rushed departures facilitated the juntas’ procurement of material and equipment as the missions were forced to withdraw quickly.

MINUSMA: A Rushed Departure

Only weeks after the Malian transitional government’s decision to expel the UN Mission in the country was announced, contests for territorial control and control

of the bases from which MINUSMA withdrew led to new fighting between the Malian army and the Tuareg separatists in the North. The fighting implied increased security risks for the UN’s withdrawal and forced the mission to speed up its already tight planning. The risks were further exacerbated by the Malian junta’s refusal to grant flight authorization for UN flights and other movement restrictions, including the blockage of 200 trucks which were stuck in Gao for over a month which implied that the mission could not collect and transport equipment from the three MINUSMA bases in the Kidal region as the initial plan proscribed. The withdrawal took place in a context of intensified armed conflict. The base in Ber was also influenced, and as the UN mission left the base two days early due to fighting, convoys were attacked twice, leading to two injured peacekeepers.

In a later incident a MINUSMA aircraft was hit by small arms fire when landing at Tessalit, while a convoy containing over 800 peacekeepers leaving Kidal, had to travel over 350 kilometres towards Gao in mostly unarmoured vehicles in a highly hostile environment.

Due to limited space, the convoy was unable to fill up on rations, water, and fuel, and was only resupplied through two MINUSMA helicopters almost a week later, adding further risks to the peacekeepers. In total the convoy suffered six mine explosions injuring 37 uniformed personnel and damaging seven vehicles. The UN’s sensible prioritization of people over equipment, meant that vehicles, equipment, ammunition generators and other assets which should have been returned to the troop contributing states or redeployed to other peacekeeping missions were destroyed in accordance with UN regulations.

Due to the abrupt manner in which MINUSMA’s mandate was ended, the mission had to develop and implement its closure and liquidation plan simultaneously during the drawdown period, a process which at the time of writing is still ongoing at bases in Gao and Bamako. According to persons involved in the process, many in the Malian transitional authorities had initially overlooked the liquidation process, having expected to be able to inherit most of the Mission’s weapons and equipment. The bad

faith expressed by the junta towards the mission was also evident in internal discussions, where the Malian transitional authorities put forward requests that the UN should refurbish the airstrip and roads in Mopti for being used extensively by the mission, resulting in the mission having to spend time preparing a list highlighting how many millions of dollars had been spent by the UN on numerous infrastructure projects across Mali during its life cycle.¹

In addition to inheriting the infrastructure, such as airfield installations and equipment, buildings and bridges constructed by the UN, the Malian junta also inherited more than 100 containers of material linked to the DDR program which could not be transported out of the country.² As mentioned before, a lot of material was however destroyed on the bases to avoid it getting into the hands of the rebels while some was taken over directly by the Malian troops as they moved into the bases. Somewhat ironically, after having ousted the mission abruptly and asked it to leave without delay, the [Malian authorities accused the UN of rushing its departure to leave space for 'terrorists'](#) to take over as the mission speeded up its withdrawal due to the fighting and obstructions. The destruction of material and equipment in the different bases in the North did not only imply a loss of material that could be used for future UN missions, but it also entailed an unexpected financial cost for the UN as the organization is responsible for reimbursing the troop contributing states for their lost equipment. Given the ongoing process, complete estimates are difficult to get, but some observers estimate that reimbursement figures for only two camps could reach 60-80 million dollars, making the total amount significantly higher.³

EUCAP Sahel Niger: Search & Seize

After EUCAP Sahel Niger was asked to leave by the Nigerien junta in December 2023, informal discussions to maintain the collaboration and the mission were initiated between

1 Discussion with person 1 with insight in MINUSMA's withdrawal, March 2023.
2 Discussion with person 2 with insight in MINUSMA's withdrawal, March 2023.
3 Discussion with person 2 with insight in MINUSMA's withdrawal, March 2023.

the EU and the transitional authorities but did not result in any change of decision. Instead, the junta decided to make the remaining months of the EU mission's stay more difficult by denying entrance in the country for individual staff and, importantly, the Head of the Mission. On the 26th of January, the junta first decided to expulse 15 returning civilian EUCAP staff members [two days after they had returned to Niger, claiming that they were militaries](#) and that the authorities had not been notified beforehand of their arrival, something that EUCAP members contested. Only two days later, [the junta denied the Head of the Mission re-entrance in the country](#), forcing her to leave with the same plane in which she arrived. Two weeks later she was allowed to enter Nigerien territory again, but only after having obtained a special *laissez-passer* note from the Minister of Interior.⁴

Apart from denying access to the country for returning EUCAP members, the Nigerien transitional authorities also procured – that is, seized - material and equipment from the mission during several unannounced searches of EUCAP's Headquarter as well as during the mission's withdrawal from the field office in Agadez. As the EUCAP flight from Agadez arrived in Niamey on the 19th of February in 2024, authorities seized the material, including lethal equipment, under the pretext that the arrival of the material was unannounced, although according to EUCAP members, it was part of the negotiated withdrawal plan. On the same day, EUCAP senior staff members were called for a meeting with the Prime Minister and the Defence Minister regarding the withdrawal, only to discover upon returning to the mission's Headquarter that Nigerien security forces were conducting an unannounced search, seizing a large amount of arms, ammunition and other equipment from the mission, including rifles, clock pistols, drones, military helmets and body armour.⁵ New, unannounced searches and seizures were conducted later the same week while local social media news accounts reported about the discovery of EU and EU nationals' [arms cache](#) and [war arsenals](#). As most of the remaining

4 Discussion with person 1 with insight into EUCAP's withdrawal process March 2023.
5 Discussion with person 2 with insight into EUCAP's withdrawal process March 2023.

EUCAP staff left later the same month in an increasingly tense climate, the Head of the Mission and the [Head of Operations were ironically not allowed to leave](#) the country until almost a month later.

French troops, MINUSMA and EUCAP Sahel Niger have been forced to rush, and in some cases, dangerous departures from Mali and Niger, made more difficult by the juntas' imposition of obstructions. Large amounts of infrastructure, including several military bases and caserns, constructed and financed by the external actors have been handed over to the authorities while equipment and material have either been left behind or seized by the latter. The coming weeks will decide what the US' presumed departure from Niger will look like. If the US is forced to withdraw, it will have to leave the drone base in Agadez, a \$200 millions US-built base from which the US has executed different types of missions, including reconnaissance flights. A decade-long automatically renewed agreement ensured the US continuous access to the base, yet the current situation puts the continuation of that agreement into question. Similarly, the future of the remaining European troops in Niger will also be up for discussion as tensions increase. The forced departures examined are noteworthy on their own, but they should also be seen in a broader light, clarifying how juntas in the Sahel operate and which shifts can be discerned globally.

CONCLUSION

The military governments' decisions to oust multilateral missions and Western security partners in the Sahel have taken place in an intensified global power competition between primarily Russia and Western states. The Sahelian leaders' coups and subsequent shift of partners need therefore to be seen against a broader trend of increased authoritarianism across the globe, [where coups represent the first, not the last resort](#) and where Western influence and multilateralism are in decline. This development has forced [deeper reflections, and ultimately dilemmas](#) for actors like the UN, the EU and its member states about where to stay engaged, with whom and how. Security force assistance missions have shown their limits in regions like the Sahel where jihadist groups

continue to expand despite a decade of external security support and where the shift to authoritarian regimes have intensified that expansion. A need to rethink how to respond and combat the increase of non-state armed groups is therefore desperately needed.

As the Sahelian leaders appear to have accepted [the so-called 'regime survival packages' offered by Russia](#), it is unlikely that there will be a transfer to civilian authorities or democratic governance any time soon. Rather than putting their hopes on such democratic transitions, Western leaders and multilateral organizations will have to reflect on what they are willing to offer – if anything – to authoritarian governments in the short and medium term. While security collaboration with Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso seems to have come to a dead end at the moment, there is a need to reflect on the relationship with Chad. If a potential offer could serve as a carrot, reflections are also needed for measures which could serve as sticks. These decisions need to be taken with an awareness of the fact that development and humanitarian aid will not only support populations in need, but also contribute to making unconstitutional regimes more sustainable, while security equipment provided to these states may turn the providers into 'procurement proxies' for adversaries.

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