

A Break with the Past: The End of French Military Presence in Chad and Senegal

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The following analysis argues that to understand the recent disengagements it is necessary to both take the broader geopolitical context into account, which offers new opportunities for actors who want to shift partners, but also to look at internal and regional reasons for a more nuanced understanding of the events. Thus, while anti-French sentiments and the possibility of engaging with new security partners certainly set the context for the Chadian and Senegalese decisions, internal political reasons are equally relevant to comprehend the disengagements. This is also reflected in the way the decisions were communicated, which emphasized continued cooperation with France in other domains. That does not mean, however, that new security partners will not attempt to take advantage of the new situation.

On the 28th of November, only a few hours after French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot's visit to Chad, the Chadian Minister of Foreign Affairs announced the end of the defence accord with France in what was described as [a "historical turn"](#). [The announcement coincided with Chad's Independence Day](#) from the former colonial power. On the same day, the newly elected Senegalese President Faye [declared the intention to close French military bases in the country](#). The date marked the 80th [anniversary of a massacre on Senegalese soldiers](#) committed by French forces. While the two declarations – independent of each other – came without any prior notifications, they [did not constitute a surprise for observers](#). Indeed, they are to be seen as part of a broader trend of African states rejecting Western and multilateral security actors while publicly

reaffirming their sovereignty. Yet, Chad's and Senegal's recent breaks with France differ from how their regional neighbours, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, handled their disengagements with the former colonial power after their respective military coups.

A LONG-TERM ALLY: CHAD

Chad has long been considered France's most loyal and stable security partner in the Sahel region. France has had troops in the country since before independence and has supported Chadian leaders for more than six decades, with [numerous military operations](#). In return, Chadian troops deployed alongside French troops in Operation Serval in Mali in 2012, and later Operation Barkhane, for which Chad hosted the French Headquarters in N'Djamena. The security guarantee from France to Chad's regime has been unequivocal. As late as 2019, France [deployed fighter jets to push back rebels from the North](#) who were threatening the rule of Idris Deby. In 2021, when the long-term autocrat was killed on the battlefield, President Macron attended his funeral sitting beside Deby's son, [Mahamat Déby, who had taken power in a 'constitutional coup'](#), demonstrating France's continued support to the new leader in spite of criticism.

Contrary to its Sahelian neighbours, who [aggressively forced out French troops amid public diplomatic breakdowns after taking power through military coups](#), Chad's new regime maintained the security collaboration with its former colonial power. France both continued to train and equip the Chadian security forces despite the latter [violently quashing popular demonstrations](#) for elections in 2022. Yet, while the collaboration appeared

solid on the surface, internal opposition against the French troops from the main opposition party grew, whereas Chadian meetings with Russian officials in January 2024 fuelled speculations about new partnerships.

A signal of the internal pressure against foreign military presence, was the expulsion of approximately [100 American troops](#) in April this year, which had been hosted within the French military base in N'Djamena. This put the French in an awkward position as allies to the Americans, who, according to interviewed officials, asked for French mediation to convince the Chadians to let them stay. Something that the French found difficult, given their own increasingly precarious presence in the country. A few months after the ejection, [US military officials prematurely rejoiced over being allowed back into the country](#), a claim which was quickly [denied by Chadian officials, who nevertheless later changed tune again](#), demonstrating that Chad wanted to call the shots in public at the very least.

REASONS FOR DISENGAGEMENT

Chad's will to call the shots and show its independence seems to have been one of several reasons behind the recent disengagement from its security collaboration with France. Only days before the Chadian public declaration, Jean-Marie Bockel, President Macron's personal envoy to the region, had presented a proposal for the drawdown and transformation of French troops in Africa. The proposal suggested a drawdown from [1000 to 300 troops in Chad – a considerable reduction of troops](#). Yet, the Chadian declaration came before any French public decision about the future drawdown, allowing the Chadian leader to take the lead in the future of the relations.

Chad and, by extension, President Déby's public lead for Franco-Chadian relations was important for the President on an international level, but perhaps even more so on a national level. In October, virtually all the [top officials of the army, police, national gendarmerie and the nomadic guard were dismissed simultaneously](#) and replaced by the President only hours after his return from a mission in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), one of Déby's newer partners.

Several higher officers of the Chadian army had voiced [dissatisfaction with President Déby's support for the Rapid Support Forces \(RSF\)'s leader, General 'Hemedti'](#), in the neighbouring Sudan war by letting the UAE [transport arms to the latter through its territory](#). A support which goes against historical links between Zaghawa communities in Chad and Sudan. Déby's position was also unpopular with France, which allegedly had put unwelcome pressure on him to cease the support and access to the Chadian territory for arms transfer. Déby's participation in the Chadian election, while accepted in public, reportedly also [received criticism behind closed doors from France](#), as the new President previously had promised not to stand in the elections.

The deteriorating security situation in the region, exemplified in two recent attacks, presumably by Boko Haram, [killing 40](#) Chadian soldiers in October and [17 in early November](#) also increased pressure on the President and indirectly on France. [Critical voices lamented the lack of a French intervention](#) to protect the Chadian soldiers and the French army's unwillingness to support a retaliation. This increased opposition against the French presence and provided another opportunity for President Déby to respond to, and subdue, internal criticism by ending the defence accords between Chad and France.

Asking French troops to leave, and thereby respond to national opposition groups' call for the end to the French military presence, was thus not only a declaration of sovereignty, but also a strategic decision by a President caught between pressure from both internal and external allies, in a rapidly deteriorating security environment.

NO MORE FRENCH ELEMENTS OF SENEGAL (EFS)?

On the same day as Chad's decision to end defence cooperation with France, almost 5000 kilometres to the West, Senegalese President Faye told the French newspaper Le Monde in an interview that ["there will soon be no more French troops in Senegal"](#). The interview was related to the commemoration of the massacre of

Senegalese troops in Thiaroye by French soldiers during the Second World War, an event which has gained attention in recent years and which prompted President Macron to send a letter to President Faye, [recognizing it as a 'massacre'](#).

The newly elected Senegalese President came to power in March with a strong sovereignty narrative, [promising to end corruption and manage natural resources](#). Earlier in November this year, Faye's party secured a [landslide victory in the legislative elections](#), allowing him to pursue an ambitious reform agenda, which clearly involved a restructuration of Senegal's security cooperations with external partners.

The French military has maintained a presence in Senegal since the latter's independence in 1960 under the name of French Elements of Senegal. The troops have been used primarily for training and regional security operations and are currently around 350. [Bockel's suggestion was to downsize the figure to around 100 soldiers](#). Yet, just as with Chad, French officials did not have the time to communicate this officially before Faye's interview. However, that does not mean that the two views are incompatible: there may be a gradual withdrawal of French troops as premised in Bockel's proposition. Indeed, just as Chad's declaration allowed for maintained collaboration with France in other domains, the Senegalese President underlined a [continued possibility for military collaboration](#) with external partners – including France - after an envisaged update of the doctrine on military cooperation.

This aspiration to maintain relations and cooperation with France differs sharply from how the (other) Sahelian states ended their security collaboration with France during the last three years. Those ruptures were characterised by public diplomatic breakdowns and demands for immediate withdrawal amidst various accusations towards the former colonial power. They were also followed almost immediately by [intensified security collaboration with Russia](#), in a sharply deteriorating security situation. So far, no public announcement about such cooperation has been made by Senegalese or Chadian officials, who

clearly face different situation situations to those of their Sahelian neighbours. Yet, new security partners are nevertheless already making headway in Chad.

NEW SECURITY PARTNERS?

While Senegal so far has remained silent on possible new security partners, Chad has intensified talks with Russia since the beginning of 2024. Chad [is bordering six countries out of which Russian forces are present in four of them](#). To the North, Libya's Marechal Haftar, who is supported by Russia, partly controls the border between the two states. To the West, Niger welcomed troops from the Africa Corps earlier this year, while ousting Western and multilateral partners, and President Déby is said to be close to Niger's General Tchiani. To the East, as mentioned above, Chad borders Sudan, and has [allowed for arms from the United Arab Emirates to pass through its territory](#) to General Hemedti, another warlord supported by the Russians, while also allowing drone attacks. The Central African Republic to the South-East, has been the flagship of the Russian Wagner group's multidimensional influence strategy since 2018.

This geopolitical context does not seem to have escaped Déby's attention, who in January this year [visited Moscow with the aim to reinforce the relations](#) with a 'partner country'. During the election campaign in April, a [former Wagner member was seen supporting Déby's campaign, another sign of Russia's increasing influence](#). The relations were further reinforced by the [visit of the Russian Foreign Minister to Chad in June](#) earlier this year. Yet, while Chad has been [exploiting the Russian-Western rivalry](#) to its advantage by playing both sides, Russia has appeared to be hesitant to offer explicit security support to Déby, due to his fragile internal position.

Up until the fall of Al-Assad last week, that might nevertheless have changed quickly given the deepening ties between the two states and Russia's will to expand its influence in Africa. Yet, while it is too early to speculate about the near future of Syria, recent events will surely impact Russia's relations with its African partners. If Russia cannot keep its [military bases in Tartus and Latakia in Syria](#),

which has served as logistical hubs and refueling stations for its flights towards Africa, it will become difficult to provide material and troops to its African partners in the Sahel and CAR. Taking on a new security partner in such contexts may not be feasible, especially as Russia has relatively little to offer. Russia's inability, and perhaps unwillingness, to prevent Al-Assad's overthrow may also have repercussions on its credibility as a security partner more broadly.

Hungary has somewhat unexpectedly sailed up as a new security partner to Chad, since it formalized its cooperation agreement with Chad in November 2023: its first official partnership with an African state. Unexpectedly, because up until last year, Hungary did not show any particular interest in the Sahel region more broadly and was one of few European states who did not contribute troops to MINUSMA. Yet, since last year, it has developed a multidimensional relationship with Chad premised on combatting irregular migration. This has included a financial package of 200 million euros to strengthen Chad's food and agricultural sectors, and 14 million euros from the European Peace Facility to strengthen Chad's security. Notably, the agreement also includes the deployment of approximately 200 Hungarian troops to Chad, which, according to interviews with diplomats, are set to arrive in early 2025.

Hungary's recent involvement in Chad appears to have been spearheaded by Victor Orbán's son, Gàspàr Orbán, a 31-year-old military officer who has visited neighboring Niger and who allegedly has attended all meetings related to Hungary's troop deployment to Chad. Exactly what role Orbán will play in the future deployment is still unclear, but given his close ties to the Presidency, the mission in Chad is likely to be followed closely by the Orbán government.

CONCLUSION

Over the past three years, French troops have been expelled from five of its security partners in Africa. The first three were preceded by strong anti-French sentiments, diplomatic tensions and resulted in rapid and aggressive ruptures of relations and a strategic realignment with Russia. The recent declarations by Chad's regime and Senegal's President differ in both form and content from the former examples. Indeed, while the announcements have not been following diplomatic procedures, they have so far remained relatively cordial, with an openness to continued collaboration with France.

While Chad's and Senegal's authorities took the initiative to end their defense collaborations with France, it is now up to France to decide whether and how to continue the relationships in a rapidly changing political and security environment. So far, Macron has for once stayed silent - which probably is a strategically wise decision. While strategic patience is a buzz word with limited utility for different situations, it might be of use here, at least for the short term, to see how the Syria situation will affect the power dynamics in and beyond the region.

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