

The Benefits And Challenges Of Divorcing France As Niger's Colonial Paternal Power

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Abstract

This Work examines the geopolitical rupture between Niger and France following the July 2023 military coup, analysing the security, economic, and political dimensions of this "divorce" through the lens of sovereignty recovery and structural dependency. Drawing on Offensive Realism and Dependency Theory, the study demonstrates that while Niger's withdrawal from the French orbit marks a legitimate attempt at decolonization, the transition from formal rupture to substantive autonomy remains incomplete. This analysis reveals four axes: (1) Increasing insecurity following the western military withdrawal marked by a 94% rise (+94%) in deaths related to terrorism between 2023 and 2024; (2) extreme vulnerability due to ECOWAS sanctions and suspension of aid; (3) real scope for uranium nationalisation and strategic diversification represented by Niger commercially selling uranium in foreign markets; and finally, (4) continuing risks of dependency substitution whereby partnerships with Russia, China, and Turkey present alternatives to French hegemony that present originating structural vulnerabilities without ensuring genuine autonomy." Simply put, unless the coup leaders are to usher in genuine national transformation through democratization, rule-of-law restoration, and endogenous economic diversification, a rupture only results in a new order of dependencies rather than a liberation. Geopolitical realignment is inevitable, but is not sufficient without the institution-building and governance changes needed in order for sovereign claims to transform into real benefits for Nigeriens.

Keywords: Niger; Neo-colonialism; Sovereignty; Sahel geopolitics; Dependency substitution

Introduction

French colonialism in Africa was characterized by the concentration of labour and raw materials for exportation back to France, the prioritization of the French language, culture and literature, and the establishment of "centralized authority" to serve the control of the metropolis (Kehinde, 1999). During the decolonization of the 1960s, France handed over "independence" to some of her colonies under conditions of continued economic and political control of the countries. As French Prime Minister Michel Debré explicitly stated in 1960: "Independence is granted on condition that the State undertakes, once independent, to respect the cooperation agreements signed previously" (Njuafac, 2024, p. 75). These agreements imposed the maintenance of French control over strategic resources, the permanent presence of military bases, the use of the CFA franc, and close institutional ties that transformed formal independence into de facto dependency, a phenomenon termed "Françafrique" (Kehinde, 2024; Chanda et al., 2024). Since independence, Francophone countries in West Africa have traversed major economic difficulties despite their natural wealth. Njuafac (2024) gives Niger as an example of this anomaly: the seventh biggest producer of uranium where a significant 25

percent of the EU's supply is sourced, and yet nearly 60 percent of its people survive on less than a dollar per day. Chanda et al. (2024) observed billions of euros earned from Niger as revenue by the French multinational Orano, with Niger receiving 13 percent of exported value in exchange for its resources. Kehinde (2024) pointed out how colonial arrangements backed with French tutelage stripped Niger and its resources, and continued in spite of decolonization.

Politically, the Francophone experience has been a long story of instability characterized by agonistic efforts to control governance, elite deceptions, French control over what Niger's own choices and deliberations should be, and coups against civilian regimes; and as academic sources (Chanda et al., 2024) suggested, more than six coups in Niger since 1974. This has become common since the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, a year remembered for the catastrophe wrought by civil war, and compounded by arms flooding into the region from Libya. Idrissa (2024) explained the resultant pressure on France to devise a military project against jihadism that degenerates into a bizarre adventure. Jihadists have expanded their territory, with walls of stones and wood rising like the Wailing Wall of Jerusalem. French troops increasingly proved incapable of controlling insecurity for civilian governments, losing more and more political legitimacy, and providing political space for undemocratic forces.

However, since the late 2010s, there has been a growing wave of anti-French activity in former French colonies of West Africa. Fonju (2024) notes that Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022, 2023) and Niger itself (as of July 2023) have seen coups of varying complexity, many of which were justified with accusations of French domination and neo-colonialism. But in Niger in particular, following the coup against the democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum on July 26, 2023, crowds in Niamey besieged the French embassy. Thousands of Nigeriens broke into the diplomatic compound, burning flags and chanting anti-French slogans, with some even waving Russian flags. That this was a serious threat to French hegemony is shown by Bah (2023), who notes that, originating from a security background, leader of the coup General Abdourahmane Tchiani, in his rapid announcement, stated that Niger would be leaving the ECOWAS regional bloc, as well as breaking with France, and potentially reuniting with Russia and other non-Western nations (Idrissa, 2024).

This 2023 event is significant. It shows the boiling over of anti-French sentiment that was derived from neo-colonialism, resource extraction, and a sense of inability to respond to emerging security challenges, but also marks the beginning of a rupture from France and an emergence of Niger into geopolitical prominence. But Idrissa (2024) makes the point that this certainly has tremendous transformational possibilities, but also several existentially dangerous risks such as the possibility of economic exclusion or isolation, so fundamentally the question is: what security and economic challenges will Niger face following its ejection from the French orbit? What real opportunities does the Niger–France divorce offer in terms of sovereignty and control of natural resources? Does rapprochement with new partners constitute genuine liberation or simply the exchange of one dependency for another?

To answer these questions, this article analyses successively: (1) the security challenges resulting from French withdrawal; (2) the economic challenges imposed by regional isolation; (3) the opportunities of the divorce in terms of sovereignty and resources; and (4) the risks of new dependency. By unpacking these analytical axes, this paper explores the Niger–France “divorce” as symptomatic of the intrinsic tension between a quest for sovereignty and the realities of contemporary interdependence

Research Design

This paper adopts a qualitative case study of Niger's post-2023 coup period. Niger, the prototypical case of Franco-African neo-colonialism, serves as paragon to interrogate the challenges of and opportunities for major geopolitical rupture. The state shares some of its DNA with its near-neighbors in the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso) on the one hand, but differs on others (like possessing strategic uranium mines, and geography). Rather than testing a specific hypothesis, this approach is descriptive and analytical, charting a couple of dimensions of the Niger-France "divorce" (dependency structure, trigger events, the challenges faced in the immediate term, and the medium-term perspectives). Data Collection: Analysis depends on three categories. Academic sources: peer-reviewed articles (International Relations, Political Science, African Studies, 2020-2023) and reports from major think tanks (Institute for Security Studies, Africa Center for Strategic Studies). Media and Official Sources: rhetoric of leaders from around the region and major powers; communications of the CNSP and documentation from ECOWAS; reports of NGOs (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch); coverage by standard bearers of news agencies beside the French state (BBC, Reuters, Al Jazeera, France24) and statistics (such as the "Trauma Database" of security incidents).

Limitations: As a single case study, findings are not generalizable except with methodological precautions. Given limited access to primary materials and the political controversy surrounding the topic, analysis relies on secondary sources. The contemporary nature of events means certain developments are provisional. Language limitations (French and English) may limit access to alternative regional perspectives.

Method of Analysis

Analytical Approach: Analysis combines qualitative content analysis of discourses, official statements, and academic texts to identify recurring themes concerning neo-colonialism, sovereignty, and geopolitical alternatives, filtered through two complementary theoretical frameworks: Offensive Realism (explaining state motivations to maximize power and security) and Dependency Theory (explaining how former colonial powers maintain control despite formal independence). These approaches illuminate, respectively, Niger's CNSP withdrawal motives and the historical structures perpetuating dependency.

Study Period and Source Selection: The study covers 2011-2024, marking three critical junctures: the 2011 Libyan collapse initiating the Sahel security crisis; 2020-2023 witnessing anti-French sentiment rise and successive military coups; and July 2023 as the focal point with Niger's regime change and continuing consequences through 2024. Sources were chosen for their thematic relevance (Niger, France, neo-colonialism, Sahel security), academic/institutional credibility (peer-reviewed, organizations or media known for integrity), and language accessibility (English and French). Excluded were biased pieces, anything lacking a fact-checking mechanism, and pre-1960s sources that don't have a modern relevance.

Limitations: As a single case study, results lack generalizability without methodological precautions. Analysis relies entirely on secondary sources due to limited primary source access (interviews, classified documents), potentially subject to interpretive biases. The contemporary and politically sensitive nature means certain developments remain provisional. Language constraints (French and English only) limit access to Arabophone or Sinophone analyses.

Literature review

Academic writing on Franco-African relations and the decolonization process provides crucial background for understanding the present rupture between Niger and France. I base this review on three major trends identified in recent scholarship; these are: the legacies of French

colonialism, the machinery of neo-colonialism (sometimes referred to as "Françafrique"), and finally debates around sovereignty and development in contemporary West Africa.

Legacies of French colonialism and assimilation policy: Many writers (for instance, Kehinde, 2024) observe that unlike the British system of indirect rule, French plans were based on achieving an "empire of Greater France" founded on assimilation to the "superior" French model. Assimilation was supposed to bring natives into the collective fold of Frenchmen, causing them to lose sight of their own culture and their conveniently "forgotten" native rulers (Kehinde, 2024). There would be a lasting impact: the colonial political class tended to be a local elite educated according to the norms of the metropolis and cut off from its population, and colonial economic structures favoured the forced sale of raw materials to the metropole and were ill-suited either for local use or for manufacture (Chanda et al., 2024).

Neo-colonialism and mechanisms of "Françafrique": As the literature makes apparent, there is no clean break from the colonial system to be found, but instead a continuity, a state of neo-colonialism. The term "Françafrique" is employed by most analysts to characterize this system of post-colonial domination. Njuafac (2024) and Chanda et al. (2024) explain the specific mechanisms of this domination as follows. The CFA franc is defined as a tool of monetary servitude that deprives African states of financial sovereignty, obliging them to deposit 50 percent of their foreign reserves with the French Treasury. Second, secret defence agreements signed at independence allowed France's permanent military installation in these countries and authorized military intervention when regimes favourable to French interests were threatened, even when such interventions never succeeded in attaining legitimacy among citizens (Njuafac, 2024). Third, the acquisition of strategic and exclusive access to resources that might be exploited by France. A typical example is Nigerien uranium being the powerhouse for one in every three French light bulbs, and yet Niger is among the poorest former French colonies in the world, with too many people still in the dark (Njuafac, 2024).

Divorce, geopolitics and sovereignty: The most recent of these works, particularly Idrissa (2024) and Fonju (2024), provide valuable context for understanding the current wave of contestation of the French model. Authors view recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger not as a crisis of institutions, but as the final stage of a "second decolonization" or fight for sovereignty. Fonju (2024) documents a potent anti-French sentiment among populations, caused both by the ineffectiveness of French military interventions (notably Operation Barkhane) against terrorism and the prideful condescension of French leaders. Idrissa (2024), however, offers a somewhat sceptical reminder about the price of that divorce: while the desire for sovereignty is understandable, cutting off ties with ECOWAS and taking Russia as a new suitor creates its own security and economic problems. Overall, the literature provides enough foundation to measure the myriad events of 2023 as an attempt to violently break away from this historical pattern.

Theoretical framework

This study mobilizes two complementary theoretical frameworks in International Relations: Offensive Realism and Dependency Theory, enabling clarification of the strategic motivations of actors and the structures shaping their behaviors.

Offensive Realism: It is Mearsheimer's (2001) view that, because the world order is anarchic (no one is responsible for state security), states are compelled to provide for their own survival by maximizing their relative power. Applied to Niger, Offensive Realism helps us understand

why CNSP authorities opted for withdrawal in 2023. No longer able to stave off the security crisis, and confronted in 2023 with the rise of alternative powers (such as Russia) and strong patriotic (anti-French) sentiment, Niger's leaders chose to break with France. More generally, the theory predicts that a state like Niger, by virtue of its uranium endowment, will attempt to regain control over this strategic resource in order to maximize its sovereignty (Waltz, 1979).

Dependency Theory: Dependency theorists such as Dos Santos (1970) and Frank (1967) argue that Africa's underdevelopment is not accidental, but the result of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Former metropolises created a division of international labour in which "peripheral" countries are confined to supplying raw materials, while "central" countries capture most of the added value through industrial transformation. In Niger, this dynamic is reflected in the fact that the country exports raw uranium, while France transforms it into electricity and sells energy at vastly higher prices. To consolidate this grossly asymmetrical trade relationship, Niger also signed a series of agreements at independence in 1960 that ensured the continuation of this state of affairs. At the same time, the rising power in Niger was its military elite, which was the least tied to France and therefore the most inclined to break away from such arrangements.

Articulation: Why did the rupture occur in 2023 (Offensive Realism), and why was the old arrangement always structurally problematic (Dependency Theory)? In short, these two frameworks help structure the analysis: Offensive Realism clarifies the short-term strategic rationale for withdrawal from the French orbit, while Dependency Theory explains the long-term patterns of exploitation that made such a rupture likely, if not inevitable. Together, they illuminate both the potential for sovereignty recovery and the fact that this recovery remains conditional, as the process risks becoming a "decolonization in words rather than in substance."

Findings and Discussion

1- Security challenges

In security terms, Niger's gradual break with its Western partners and some regional frameworks has manifested as increased internal and cross-border threats. Braun (2025) claims that the 2023 coup and "disruption of partnerships" have thrown Niger into a "security crossroads", with a capacity gap, increasing jihadism, and broken cooperation. Before this change of regime, Niger was the "quintessential" Western security partner in the Sahel, in spite of resurgent jihadist insurgency. Braun (2025) reminds us that Niger faced Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) on Lake Chad; JNIM and Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP/ISGS) in the tri-border area with Mali and Burkina Faso; and unlike its "underperforming" neighbours, Niger balanced quiet participation in regional architectures (G5 Sahel, the Multinational Joint Task Force, joint operations with Nigeria, Chad, and Benin) with a more complex domestic strategy mixing targeted repression and leadership decapitation with tactical negotiations where possible. Braun (2025) insists this brought violent terrorism in early 2023 down to its lowest level since 2018, without uprooting insurgent systems.

The coup in July 2023 has changed this precarious balance. Adeoti et al. (2025) demonstrate how challenges to the legitimacy of the CNSP, sanctions levied by ECOWAS, and the progressive scaling back of military cooperation with France and the U.S. resulted in Nigerien forces expending more resources to secure Niamey and bolster regime control rather than providing coverage in more exposed areas along the borders. Braun (2025) reports that from 2023 to 2024 deaths from terrorism in Niger rose by about 94%, moving the country from tenth

to fifth most affected globally. In this period, jihadists have grasped the potential of the new equilibrium to extend their reach, with the “Actors of Conscience” dataset (2025) demonstrating how JNIM and ISSP have significantly grown their activity in the borderlands of Niger, Benin, and Nigeria. They have established a new frontline in the region of Dosso, northern Benin and northwestern Nigeria, attacking state security forces and sabotaging the Niger–Benin oil pipeline alongside a strategy of social penetration. They apply informal taxation, preaching, and coercive control of local economies, while also having common areas of presence and focus, such as Gaya and Dioundiou; this makes for a dangerously competitive space where civilians are at great risk.

This has prompted Bolarinwa (2024) to raise concern that Niamey’s withdrawal from the Multinational Joint Task Force, which has coordinated Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Benin against Boko Haram and ISWAP since 2015, threatens to create “a security vacuum” around Lake Chad. Weapons and fighters may flow into the country, and attacks on camps for internally displaced people and lakeside communities may resume, thus undermining the gains made by the MNJTF in the last decade through cooperation with partners. The erosion of cooperation that this entails, alongside the diplomatic fabric ripping with some neighbours, robs Niger of space for jointly launching operations while creating more opportunities for armed groups to take advantage of porous borders. In such conditions, it is new security partnerships that should step in, but even they only marginally do so, with Braun (2025) arguing that partnership with Russia through the Africa Corps and deepening military cooperation via the Alliance of Sahel States is meant to anchor Niger’s strategic sovereignty but is still constrained by weaker intelligence, airpower and heavy-logistics capability. Studies of Mali’s experience with similar actors indicate that they often come to be associated with grievous human rights violations, thus fuelling local grievances and providing jihadists with powerful material for their narratives. Undermining Niger’s quest for security emancipation from France is the fact that more formal autonomy also correlates, in the interim, with increased aggravation of terrorist threats and violent reconfiguration on its peripheries.

2- Economic challenges

Economically, Niger’s rupture with France and separation from Western and regional partners has created severe macroeconomic fragility. As Braun (2025) states, ECOWAS sanctions in response to the coup, the suspension of parts of international aid, and the closure of key trade corridors have led to a rapid contraction in commerce, rising prices of basic goods, and increasing pressure on public finances. This pressure is all the more severe because, as Bolarinwa (2024, citing experts) notes, nearly half of Niger’s national budget was funded by external assistance before the crisis, most of it from Western partners who are either disengaging or have already disengaged.

The reconfiguration of economic relationships is undertaken along the lines of resource nationalism, but the shifts incur high costs in the short term. As Braun (2025) explains, Niger’s authorities are asserting sovereign control over uranium and oil, notably by contesting the role of major foreign companies in these sectors. This strategy, however, has limits on both sides: continued dependence on extractive rents leaves Niger vulnerable to international price volatility as well as delays in investment (Bloch & Monteiro, 2024); and expelling or attempting to pressure long-standing actors may deter new partners or place them in a strong bargaining position when renegotiating terms of trade.

Moreover, the financial and commercial squeeze of sanctions already fraying the humanitarian fabric prompted Bolarinwa (2024) to note that banking restrictions and limits on transfers have

reduced the state's capacity to deliver social services and meet its recurrent expenses in a country that is already one of the poorest in the world and relies heavily on imported food (Braun, 2025). The combined dangers of security crisis, aid cuts, price inflation, and waning investment risk locking Niger into a conundrum in which economic stagnation deepens political and social crisis, thereby further raising the cost of its quest for sovereignty.

To summarize, the economic threats of the “divorce” have a compounded character: an immediate shock and distress from sanctions and loss of finance; enduring uncertainty over whether Niger can redesign partnerships without generating new patterns of dependency; and increasing consumer vulnerabilities in an already fragile state on the brink of humanitarian catastrophe.

3- Opportunities of the Divorce

Niger's withdrawal from the orbit of France provides prospects for recovering ownership over its natural resources and diversifying their use in ways more aligned with national interests, representing one of the most serious recent attempts at economic and political reassertion. These possibilities, however, remain fraught and highly uncertain in terms of durability.

3.1. Repossession of natural resources and “neo-protectionism”

Niger's decision to repossess its uranium directly is not only economically significant but also carries major geopolitical implications. In June 2024, according to Ekanem (2025), the Nigerien government nationalized the Somaïr mine and stated that uranium would henceforth be commercialized directly on international markets. Convoys of uranium have recently departed from Arlit for the port of Lome in Togo, marking the first time Niger truly and directly commercializes its uranium. This ends more than 50 years of French dominance: with 90% of extraction overseen by Orano, France had limited Niger's economic return to about 13% of the value of all uranium exported. Nigerien resource nationalism follows an increasingly popular path. Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea now pursue similar strategies, based on the rationale that the African state must dominate extraction and export channels if it is to benefit directly from its natural assets. In addition, these states have also repossessed petroleum resources, as Niger did with the construction of the 2 000-km Niger–Benin pipeline (Ekanem, 2025), and by securing a 400 million USD loan from China in April 2024, which was crucial in stabilizing a struggling economy after regional sanctions.

3.2. Partnership diversification and regional alternative (AES)

While France was “divorcing” Niger, it was not isolating it, but rather leaving space for a strategic reorientation towards alternative partners such as Russia, China and Turkey, capable of providing technological and diplomatic support free from Western democratic conditionality. By joining the Alliance of Sahel States in September 2023, Niger, with Mali and Burkina Faso, moved further; now they would build their countries' security sovereignty into regional blocs, not towards a Western-aligned governance status. RSIS (2025) state that the AES provides a collective defence mechanism as well as a political coordinating forum through which members deal with external powers, pulling Niger into a recognisable, if separatist, regional bloc rejecting ECOWAS and Western-sponsored alliances.

3.3. Restoration of political dignity and endogenous development potential

Beyond the strictly economic and military dimensions of the “divorce” with France lies the promise of symbolic and political restoration of long-denied national dignity. Traditionally, Niger received official development assistance equal to almost 40% of its national budget;

theoretically, with mining and petroleum resources progressively nationalized, Niger has greater latitude to finance investment in its own human capital, infrastructure and public services. Control over these revenues could allow Niger to gradually extricate itself from dependency on foreign aid, and even consider genuine economic diversification beyond extractive rents.

To sum up, the Niger–France divorce does offer opportunities for economic sovereignty restoration, partnership diversification (both with non-Western actors and within the AES), and a certain ‘legitimacy’ in the regional context disconnected from accepted Western frameworks. Albeit contingent upon resource prices and geopolitical stability, these opportunities may be fleeting unless the new authorities can turn them into sustainable wins for the population.

4- Risks of New Dependency

Despite opportunities presented by France's withdrawal, Niger could simply be substituting one dependency for another. Alliances with Russia and others, while marketed as independent choices, contain systemic risks that threaten to perpetuate Niger's vulnerabilities.

4.1. Partnership with Russia (Africa Corps): Limited Capabilities and Documented Violations

The arrival of Africa Corps in Niger in April 2024 demonstrates both operational limitations and predatory risks. CTC Sentinel (2024) describes them as the state-backed successor to Wagner Group, without the corporate infrastructure that allowed Wagner to finance operations. Massive recruitment needs indicate these weaknesses – the Kremlin's ambition to find 40,000 troops proved impossible, highlighting structural problems related to payment and organizational prestige. Even graver, Africa Corps's operational record raises alarms for serious human rights violations. Human Rights Watch (2024) explains that Russian mercenary operations in Mali since Prigozhin's death saw an 81 percent increase in violence involving Russian mercenaries and a 65 percent increase in reported fatalities, including summary executions, mutilations, and deliberate village burnings. CTC Sentinel (2024) adds that Africa Corps in Niger seems to operate mainly as a praetorian guard protecting General Tiani's regime rather than as a counter-terrorism force, and that very little evidence exists that they have achieved tangible security gains since arriving.

4.2. The Diversity Pitfall

The route of diversifying away from a French partner comes with its own pitfall. Diversifying toward China, Turkey or Gulf states comes with its own dependency traps as well. While Chinese loans, Turkish military technology or Gulf state investment offer alternatives in the immediate instance, they create new asymmetries and fragilities: (i) power asymmetry in negotiation when sourcing and acquiring basic goods and services; (ii) fragmentation of the nation at the level of national strategic decision-making; and (iii) the risk of turning Niger into the ground of sublimated great-power conflict, without the democratic or institutional guardrails that such reliance may or may not have provided in the past when these pacts were more associated with Western actors.

4.3. The "Alliance of the Sahel States": Where it All Begins and Ends

The AES scheme is described in Modern Diplomacy as a restoration of sovereignty, with genuine institutions and civil power built within. Without parliamentary oversight, participation from the civil sphere or an architecture of economic cooperation between participating nations, the AES is entirely dependent on three military leaders to keep their

integrity together. If there is a leadership switch, or a split in tactical direction, its cohesion may collapse very quickly. ECOWAS, of which Niger was a member, is a business association and has walked away, leaving businesses scrambling in a game where it is cheaper to trade if you happen to have sea access; but if you are a landlocked state like Niger, you may gain symbolic vindication yet struggle to survive in such conditions, and your prices for basic commodities may skyrocket. In addition, Niger is not rich or economically strong and is open to shocks from benefactors.

4.4. Authoritarianism, Human Rights, and the Lag Cycle

According to Amnesty (2025), the CNSP regime has arbitrarily detained several dozen civilians; President Bazoum and seven ministers have effectively been removed from office and denied their right to a fair process. A new anti-terror ordinance arbitrarily “suspects”, i.e. criminalizes civilians as terrorism suspects, allowing the regime to detain activists and opponents under the cover of counter-terrorism.

4.5: The Existential Risk: Substitution Rather than Liberation

In short, if Niger chooses substitution rather than liberation, it is probably entering a dependency substitution process in which the country will exchange clear-cut French domination for a convoluted entanglement of dependency on multiple external partners who have contradictory ambitions. Unless Niger actually changes the substantive nature of power by strengthening, investing in and respecting civilian institutions, it will merely remain a playground for power brokers while nurturing the seeds of tyranny and insecurity within.

Conclusion

The 2023 coup and rupture with France represent a watershed moment in West African history, an emergent rupture steeped in decades of asymmetrical neo-colonial relations, accumulated failures of security, and rising popular frustration, challenging the old neo-colonial order in pursuit of a “second decolonization” a recovery of sovereignty and national dignity that has profound legitimacy. Niger’s efforts to nationalize uranium extraction, diversify strategic partnerships and regional institutions through the Alliance of Sahel States are sincere endeavours to develop a proper sense of emancipation from French control. Unfortunately, as this analysis argues, the ambitions of rupture have not yet borne fruit. While there are limited opportunities to recover occupancy of the space of sovereignty, these avenues are made difficult by the multiple vulnerabilities of the current status quo. The security crisis has deepened since 2023, perhaps precisely because of the absence of the West, with terrorism-related deaths rising an unprecedented 94% between 2023 and 2024. Economic isolation has been accelerated by ECOWAS sanctions, while its dependent reliance on extractive rents and capital inflows deepens its macroeconomic vulnerability. Russian, Chinese and Turkish partnerships, while affording tactical alternatives to French domination, may exacerbate a state of economic dependency and geopolitical subordination without the mitigating infrastructure such as international fund structures – that formerly accompanied partnership with the West. Finally, the illegitimate manner in which the CNSP regime has adopted authoritarianism, militarized internal security and the judiciary, and validated this through arbitrary detentions, extra-judicial prosecutions and expansive counter-terrorism ordinances, threatens the very legitimacy of rupture with France. Without the respect for rule of law, civilian accountability and inclusive governance it failed to achieve while still tethered to France, Niger risks merely exchanging a significantly less transparent French neo-colonialism for an as yet impenetrably opaque network of vulnerabilities, simultaneously “saving” nothing while alienating

populations as well as furnishing recruitment opportunities for jihadists. The tension described, then, is not between rupture and continuity; rather, it is between formal sovereignty and substantive autonomy. Niger has achieved the former breaking its institutional and financial ties with France but cannot achieve the latter without also altering the governance of the nation's centre. That will require gargantuan investments into human capital (e.g. education, the judiciary, etc.) and the secular bureaucratic structures that bind society together for positive political ends while reducing the rentier nature of the state, massive investment in economic diversification, as well as taking practical steps towards building upon genuine regional cooperation on issues beyond merely sharing information or logistical support to increase state militaries' capabilities and chances of success in counter-terror operations. Such a "divorce", without these structures, ultimately risks merely being a reordering of dependencies.

Recommendations

In light of the above analysis, several policy-oriented recommendations suggest themselves:

For Niger's CNSP authorities:

Invest in rule of law and civilian accountability rather than regime consolidation. The legitimacy of the sovereignty recovery project rests upon proving that Niger's departure from the French orbit will serve the people's interests rather than those of a consolidated regime. Reversing the slide into authoritarianism, freeing political prisoners, and restoring legitimate judicial oversight in the hands of independent institutions will improve internal cohesion and lessen jihadist narratives.

Invest in endogenous capacity and not in security outsourcing. Niger should seek not simply to fill its coffers with uranium and oil revenues through external partners, but to invest those revenues in training professional armed forces and intelligence capabilities, and in funding community-based security measures that address the drivers of jihadism (poor economic prospects, marginalization, and weak governance).

Seek partnerships that are selective and conditional and avoid the wholesale embrace of one external power or another. Niger should retain diplomatic flexibility with actors such as China, Russia and Turkey while maintaining space for dialogue with the West, preserving those parts of the relationship that further regional peace especially with Nigeria and Senegal and promoting narrowly tailored engagement on intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism training. Beyond these goals, it should retain as much diplomatic room for manoeuvre as possible, ensuring that the pursuit of sovereignty is not undermined by new forms of institutional bondage to foreign powers.

Seek to revive regional cooperation both within what remains of the AES and through efforts to re-join a reformed ECOWAS. The current all-or-nothing approach complete abandonment of ECOWAS in favour of staying within the AES imposes real economic costs on the civilian population. A negotiated re-entry into ECOWAS, extracting commitments to support a reformed democratic order, would in the long run offer smoother economic prospects without necessarily abandoning sovereignty claims.

For regional actors (Nigeria, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, ECOWAS): Play less of a punitive role and adopt a more pragmatic mediatory role. While politically justified, ECOWAS sanctions have unintentionally worsened Niger's economic situation and provided the CNSP with a pretext to retain power regardless of its authoritarian drift. Engagement should be conditional on gradual improvements rather than on an all-or-nothing isolation of the regime.

Discuss collectively West Africa's security concerns in the Sahel, regardless of French involvement. Regional solutions tailored to West African needs will be far better received than French paternalism or reliance on Russian mercenaries.

For international stakeholders (UN, African Union, Western powers): Facilitate discussion and support civil society and transitional justice initiatives rather than dealing exclusively with governments. Niger's long-term stability relies in part on addressing past grievances, building an inclusive government that responds to urgent equality and empowerment needs, and ensuring accountability for abuses committed by security forces. Likely solutions will involve investing in Nigerien civil society rather than imposing external blueprints, and avoiding the imposition of destabilising neoliberal conditionality that reproduce neo-colonial patterns.

Acknowledge the legitimacy of Niger's anti-colonial claims while proposing alternative paradigms for international cooperation. Western partners too often frame the struggle over Niger's sovereignty solely through the lens of geopolitical competition with Russia, thereby obstructing genuine cooperation based on democratic solidarity and persuasion precisely what Africa needs more than new forms of authoritarian consolidation and the influx of mercenaries. The key question is not who "wins" Niger, but how to construct forms of cooperation that genuinely support sovereignty, accountability and shared security.

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