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The Kremlin's march through the Sahel: Russian forces in Niger

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On 10 April, an around 100-strong contingent of the Africa Corps arrived in Niger. This para-military formation is supervised by the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, and it has replaced the so-called Wagner Group, (see '*The Wagner forces under a new flag: Russia's Africa Corps in Burkina Faso*'). Russia has thus expanded its military presence in the Sahel to another country after Sudan (2017), Mali (2021) and Burkina Faso (2024).

The unit's arrival was preceded by the Kremlin's contact with the military junta which seized power in Niger in July 2023 (previously Niamey had closely cooperated with Western states). In December 2023, Russia's deputy defence minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov, who supervises the Africa Corps, visited Niger. Then in January 2024, a delegation of the putschist government visited Moscow as part of its first foreign trip, and in March the junta's chief General Abdourahamane Tchiani held a telephone conversation with Vladimir Putin. Alongside this, the junta has made the French contingent leave the country (which it did in December 2023). The putschists have also terminated several agreements which regulated the US military presence in Niger, and on 20 April the US Department of State consented to the withdrawal of a US contingent of around a thousand soldiers (the US controlled two air bases in Niger, which are used to carry out operations using UAVs, among other things). Talks with Niger's military leadership regarding the parameters of this process are expected to start this week. Smaller German and Italian units have also been stationed on this country's territory.

Commentary

- Although the Russian forces have officially arrived in Niger to serve as instructors, they will effectively serve as a tool to expand the Kremlin's influence in Africa. Installing the Africa Corps in that country will boost the logistical network between Libya, the Sahel states and the Central African Republic, where the Russian military has also been operating. It is unlikely that the Russian troops could contribute to a real improvement in the security situation of a country which has been affected by the activity of Islamist terrorist groups (especially in the context of the US withdrawal). The contingent's small size indicates that it will mainly be keeping the ruling junta in power. In exchange for this protection, the Russians can count on receiving licences for natural resource mining (Niger is the world's seventh biggest producer of uranium).

- The Africa Corps' arrival in Niger should be viewed as a success for Moscow and a failure for Paris (and also Washington) in the indirect rivalry on the continent. The undisclosed air defence systems which Russia has brought there (the Russians will reportedly train the local military how to use them) have additionally boosted the Kremlin's position and the security of the pro-Russian regime (the Economic Community of West African States initially considered intervening in Niger, although Russia and other states warned against such a scenario). Moreover, from the EU's perspective, increased Russian influence in Niamey equates to a greater risk of migration pressure being exerted on Europe using the smuggling routes which run from Niger to Libya and Algeria. This will require a response from the EU.
- Once the US withdraws its forces from Niger, the Africa Corps will most likely take over the abandoned American infrastructure, which will facilitate its further expansion. Chad is another country Russia may target; it is currently hosting around 1000 French soldiers and around 100 US soldiers, and has served as a destination for the French troops which withdrew from Niger. Chad's ruling junta under Mahamat Déby is seeking to step up its cooperation with Russia and the Moscow-backed Sahel states. In January 2024, the junta's leader visited Moscow and met Putin. The installation of military assets in N'Djamena would be a strategic success for the Kremlin, because Russia would thus gain a land connection between all the African states in which it has been operating militarily.