

Macron announces withdrawal of French troops from Mali

Alex Lantier**19 February 2022**

On Thursday, as a European Union (EU)-Africa summit opened in Brussels, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the withdrawal of French troops from Mali. French troops have been stationed in Mali ever since 2013, when Socialist Party (PS) President François Hollande intervened in Mali after the 2011 NATO war in Libya.

This withdrawal is driven by explosive popular opposition to French imperialism, notably in the aftermath of NATO's humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan last year and after repeated massacres committed by French troops or local militias set up with tacit French backing in the Sahel region of Northern Africa. Macron made very clear, however, that Paris will not fully withdraw from its former African colonial empire but will rather step up its diplomatic intrigues in the region.

Standing next to Senegal's President Macky Sall and European Council President Charles Michel, he referred to NATO's threats of war with Russia over Ukraine: "At this time, as other strategic threats loom over the security of the European continent and legitimately attract our diplomatic attention, it was first of all necessary to send a signal of continuity in the struggle against terrorism in the Sahel." He hailed the "federating role" France has supposedly played, overseeing the deployment of 25,000 troops from over a dozen countries to Mali, including 5,000 French troops.

Macron made clear France's role in its former African colonial empire would remain essentially unchanged and that it would now work through a broader Coalition of the Sahel alliance. "We will continue, as I told my partners yesterday, to play this federating role and, when a military dimension is needed, the role of the leading nation. Beyond the continuation of our engagement, these discussions also have made clear a consensus exists to develop our action in the Sahel," he said.

Macron laid out a strategy of isolating Mali by surrounding it with a broader alliance of neo-colonial regimes, like that of Sall in Senegal, that are closely allied with French imperialism.

In addition to a UN military contingent and the Takuba

task force of European troops, Macron currently works with the so-called G5 alliance of Sahel states who provide the French military with cannon fodder for its operations in Mali. These states are Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. However, Macron also proposed to integrate the countries of the "Accra Initiative" along the Gulf of Guinea coast—Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo and Benin—into his Coalition of the Sahel.

Without referring to protests against the French military presence in Mali, Burkina Faso and beyond, Macron admitted that it was necessary for him to "change the parameters of our military presence. In the Sahel and in the Gulf of Guinea, the expectations of our partners have developed. The sensibilities of public opinion in the region have, also, changed."

On this basis, Macron announced the withdrawal of French troops and the Takuba coalition of German and other EU troops. He said, "This withdrawal will involve the closure of bases in Gossi, Ménaka and Gao. It will be carried out in an orderly manner, together with the Malian armed forces and the UN mission in Mali. ... With the agreement of the authorities in Niger, European elements will be redeployed alongside Niger's armed forces in the border region with Mali."

Macron insisted that he "completely rejects" the notion of a French "failure" in Mali, blaming the withdrawal instead on the Malian military junta and its supposed disloyalty to France. He said, "We cannot remain militarily engaged alongside authorities whose strategy we do not share, any more than we share their hidden objectives. This is the situation we face in Mali today. The war on terror cannot justify everything. It must not, on the pretext of being an absolute priority, become an exercise in indefinitely maintaining oneself in power."

Macron's attempt to cover up mass opposition provoked by the French war in Mali is based on hypocrisy and lies. The withdrawal from Mali is driven not primarily by the Malian military, which has a long record of collaborating with French forces, but by rising opposition among workers

and rural toilers across Mali and all of West Africa to the French military presence. The decisive issue is unifying this movement, together with that of the working class in Europe, in an international struggle against war and for the withdrawal of French-EU troops from Africa.

Throughout the Mali war, the pretext Paris advanced was a fraud. In response to revolutionary uprisings of the working class in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, Paris worked closely with the CIA and Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms to arm Islamist terror groups in wars for regime change in Libya and Syria. Even as it relied on Al Qaeda-linked “rebel” militias in Syria, however, it invaded Mali, claiming it would save the regime in Bamako from these same Islamist networks.

Anger mounted in Mali, especially over the last several years, amid atrocities such as the French bombing of a wedding ceremony in Bounty that killed 22 and massacres by rival local self-defense militias set up across the region with tacit French backing. Dozens or hundreds were slaughtered in Ogossagou, Sobane Kou and Solhan in neighboring Burkina Faso. In 2020, the army toppled Malian President Ibrahim Bouba Keïta and then, after Malian unions shut down a planned general strike in Bamako, launched another coup in May 2021.

Bitter debates erupted inside the French ruling elite over how to deal with the new Malian junta led by President Assimi Goïta, which tacked back and forth between pledges of loyalty to Paris and statements in line with mounting popular anger at the French presence. Moreover, the junta began seeking out ties with Russia, as well as the Russian private security firm, Wagner Group.

Last October, Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga accused Paris in an interview with Russia’s *RIA Novosti* of arming Islamist terrorists to feed the war in Mali and justify a continued French military presence. Four days later, however, Maïga granted an interview to the French daily *Le Monde* to insist that the junta still supported a French military presence in Mali.

Asked point-blank whether the Malian government wanted French troops to leave its territory, Maïga replied: “We have never said this. We have never broken the bilateral defense accord that unites us with France. But in June, we woke up one morning to media reports that France was suspending military operations with the Malian army, without warning or explanation, because a new government had been set up that they did not like.” Maïga stressed that the Malian junta was in talks with Moscow and with the Algerian military regime.

Paris refused to be won over, however. The Macron government provoked mass protests last month across Mali when it backed sanctions by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) cutting off trade in

nonessential goods with Mali and freezing Malian state assets at the Central Bank of the West African States. Hundreds of thousands marched, with many holding signs that read: “Down with Emmanuel Macron, Long Live Russia.”

As NATO threatens Russia with war over Ukraine, Paris is clearly doubling down on its strategy of isolating Mali and seeking to assert its neocolonial hegemony over West Africa, despite explosive popular opposition and the deep unpopularity of its Africa policies among workers at home.

As NATO works to instigate a war with Russia in Ukraine, the key issue is building an international movement in the working class against war and neo-colonial occupations. Moscow and the Malian junta are clearly trying to exploit an explosive growth of working class and popular anger against Paris. However, neither the Malian junta nor the Algerian dictatorship—which in 2019 faced mass anti-government *hirak* protests by millions of Algerian workers—nor the Putin government in Moscow stand for either democratic rights or opposition to imperialism.

Indeed, it is more or less apparent that an important calculation in France’s support for the emerging NATO war against Russia in Ukraine is that it will put more pressure on the Malian regime to cut ties with Moscow and instead deal only with Paris. Moscow, which is responding to NATO threats by desperately seeking to leverage its economic ties with the EU, will not prove a reliable ally of the Malian workers and oppressed masses.

The struggle to expel the imperialist powers from Africa and to unite the continent’s hundreds of millions of workers and toiling people requires the building of an international anti-war movement in the working class on the basis of a socialist program, demanding the withdrawal of all French troops from Africa.



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