

# West African states step back from immediate military action against Niger due to popular opposition

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Plans for a military intervention in Niger to restore overthrown president Mohamed Bazoum have been put on hold by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Four days after its deadline for his reinstatement passed, a closed-doors summit was held Thursday in Abuja, capital of lead ECOWAS state Nigeria. Its President Bola Tinubu told the media, “We prioritise diplomatic negotiations and dialogue as the bedrock of our approach” and said it was “our duty to exhaust all avenues of engagement to ensure a swift return to constitutional governance in Niger.”

A week ago, Nigeria and ECOWAS were speaking about a military intervention as almost a certainty. Senegal, Benin and the Ivory Coast had all pledged to contribute troops and battle plans had reportedly been drawn up.

The union was backed by the imperialist powers, most aggressively the former colonial power in Niger, France, whose 1,500 troops are threatened with expulsion. Their main concern, set out by US Secretary of the State Antony Blinken, was that Niger would go the way of Mali and Burkina Faso—where military coups took place in May 2021 and September 2022—and turn to Russia and its Wagner paramilitary group.

Russian flags have featured in pro-coup demonstrations in Niger and its military leaders have reportedly been in touch with Wagner.

Blinken said Tuesday, “I think what happened, and what continues to happen in Niger was not instigated by Russia or by Wagner, but... they tried to take advantage of it.

“Every single place that this Wagner group has gone, death, destruction and exploitation have followed.”

China is also seen as a threat to imperialist interests, which include major stakes in Nigerien uranium mines and oil fields and refineries. In 2019, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) launched a five-year plan to “deter Chinese and Russian malign action”. The US has two military bases and 1,100 declared soldiers in Niger.

Almost immediately, however, imperialist officials were sounding notes of caution, stressing “mediation” and a “diplomatic solution” between Niger and ECOWAS. On Wednesday, Blinken called in careful language for “continued efforts to find a peaceful resolution to the current constitutional crisis,” specifying only “the immediate release of [Bazoum] and his family.”

Fears that a war would destabilise imperialist investments and security agreements played a part, particularly for the European powers, who have turned to Africa as a source of energy exports in the wake of the NATO-Russia war and rely on Niger to police the movement of refugees set for Europe across the Sahara to the Mediterranean coast.

But the main problem faced by Washington and other imperialist capitals is anti-imperialist sentiment and social discontent throughout West Africa undermining ECOWAS’s ability to respond—most importantly Nigeria.

Mali and Burkina Faso were suspended from the union following military coups which made a point of appealing to anti-colonial feeling. French and other European soldiers were told to leave.

Both countries pledged to defend Niger in any war against it. They have written to the United Nations Security Council asking it to prevent any military intervention and “Accusing Western powers of using ECOWAS as a proxy to conceal a hostile agenda towards Niger,” according to *Al Jazeera*.

During a visit to the Nigerien capital Niamey earlier in the week, a Mali government spokesperson commented, “I would like to remind you that Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have been dealing for over 10 years with the negative... consequences of NATO’s hazardous adventure in Libya.”

Mali’s military rulers have their own self-serving reasons for raising these points, but they are true and express broadly held views among workers and the rural poor.

NATO’s 2011 war against the government of Muammar Gaddafi shattered Libyan society and created a breeding ground for Islamist militias—the first of which were funded

and trained by the US as proxies. These have spilled over into the wider Sahel region, killing thousands and displacing hundreds of thousands, sustained by the poverty of a region devastated by centuries of Western colonialism and imperialism.

Ongoing violence has since been used as a pretext for imperialist soldiers and military bases to operate throughout the region, amid widespread popular hostility.

The governments in Mali and Burkina Faso fear this anger. Their biggest worry is that a major Western-sponsored conflict would unleash the mass and genuine anti-imperialist sentiment they imitate and topple them from their own positions of power—from which they adopt various anti-colonial poses while overseeing the continued relentless exploitation of the population by global banks and corporations.

The class character of these military regimes has been made very clear by Niger itself, where Tchiani has appointed Ali Lamine Zeine as prime minister—a former finance minister who oversaw an International Monetary Fund-directed “restructuring” of the Nigerien economy in the early 2000s.

Similar issues have burst to the surface in Nigeria. Tinubu’s bullish response immediately following the coup has melted away over the last week under the glare of popular opposition, especially in the north of the country, whose people share close ties with Nigeriens.

The BBC reported that many people were “appalled that electricity to Niger was cut.” The country depends on Nigeria for 70 percent of its supplies and has suffered blackouts.

A 24-year-old textile trader, who plans to marry a Nigerien woman, told the *New York Times*, “If a fight erupts, who will be at the receiving end? Me and most of us with dual nationality.”

The paper noted the “ethnic ties, language and a livelihood from active trade” binding the two populations. Hausa speakers are spread across the two countries, divided by the colonial border drawn between the French Nigerien and British Nigerian colonies.

What the *Financial Times* referred to as “fierce domestic opposition” builds on growing popular anger against Tinubu’s savage economic programme enacted on behalf of international investors, which will see the government spend 60 percent of its revenue on debt repayments this year. Fuel subsidies have been cut, tripling petrol prices, and inflation is running at 22 percent, prompting strikes and protests. It is only three years since anti-police protests rocked the country.

Concerns that an unpopular and costly war would explode this powder keg were reflected in nervous statements urging

against war from various politicians, civil society groups, councils of elders, religious organisations and even General Christopher Gwabin Musa, Nigeria’s chief of defence staff—the most senior uniformed military adviser to the president and minister of defence—who commented that Nigeria and Niger would be “next to each other forever” and that a war would be like “fighting your brother.”

Without Nigeria to lead it, any ECOWAS intervention is impossible. The country has a larger population than the 14 other ECOWAS states combined, is the largest economy in Africa, and its roughly 230,000 soldiers dwarf other local militaries.

Amid the geopolitical schemes, conspiracies and power plays across West Africa and the entire continent, the decisive factor is the rapidly growing working class and the rural poor. Their hostility to the imperialist powers has seen French soldiers driven out of its former colonial stomping grounds almost entirely and forced the US to operate with a low profile, leaving major actions to proxies to which it bestows the titles of “free” and “democratic” countries.

As the situation in Nigeria shows, even this strategy is falling foul of popular opposition to imperialism’s continued baleful influence in the region, leaving its clients without a trace of “democratic” legitimacy.

However, the threat of war remains, driven by the global conflict between the imperialist powers and Russia and China, erupting in different flashpoints and via various proxies across the globe. Tinubu announced at the close of the ECOWAS summit in Abuja that “no option had been taken off the table” and that the union’s “standby force” had been activated.

The danger can only be averted by organising the anti-imperialist sentiment and hostility to the local ruling class behind a socialist programme, which sees workers in Africa join forces with the international working class around the world in a fight against all war and exploitation.



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