

Russia strengthens ties with African military juntas calling to expel French troops

Athiyan Silva, Alex Lantier
8 September 2023

A week ago, a Russian delegation led by Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov visited Burkina Faso and met with the head of the military junta, Ibrahim Traoré. Russia has not had a formal diplomatic presence in Burkina Faso since 1992, when the Soviet embassy closed as the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union.

After meeting with Traoré, Yevkurov told reporters they had discussed military aid, nuclear energy and economic ties. He said, “We will do our best to help you develop in all these spheres. I have already reminded your president of this. In the field of military cooperation, we will discuss the training format of your cadets and officers of different levels, including pilots, in our country.”

The Russian-Burkinabè military talks highlighted both the explosive international geopolitical tensions emerging amid the NATO war with Russia in Ukraine, and complex political issues raised by the growing mobilization of African workers and youth against imperialism.

The junta in Burkina Faso, like those in nearby Mali and Niger, came to power amid deep popular opposition to French imperialism’s 2013-2022 war in Mali and across the Sahel. All three juntas have asked France, the former colonial power, to withdraw troops from their countries. While Paris has called for Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast and other countries in the French-backed Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to invade and topple the three juntas, Moscow is offering these juntas support.

Denunciations of Russian operations in Africa by NATO imperialist powers such as France reek of hypocrisy. They are part of a thinly-disguised attempt to maintain these powers’ crumbling domination of the region, including, potentially, by plunging the entire Sahel into war.

Thus French President Emmanuel Macron’s dismissed the Nigerien, Burkinabè and Malian juntas’ ties with Moscow as anti-democratic and a “baroque alliance of self-proclaimed pan-Africanists with neo-imperialists.” Given France’s colonial past, and its wars against Algerian and Cameroonian independence that cost hundreds of thousands of lives, such remarks have no credibility. After a decade of

bloody French operations in Mali and across the Sahel, masses of African workers and youth legitimately view them with contempt.

Nevertheless, bitter historical experience shows African workers cannot rely on military alliances with Moscow to oppose imperialism. The struggle against imperialism, which has deep ties with the African capitalist class, requires an African and international mobilization of the working class and oppressed masses on a revolutionary, socialist program, aiming to overthrow the economic power of the ruling elites. This is the lesson in particular of the French-backed ouster and murder of pro-Soviet Burkinabè President Thomas Sankara by Blaise Compaoré in 1987.

Neither the post-Soviet capitalist regime in Moscow, nor the military juntas in the Sahel aim to carry out such a struggle. The Kremlin views the Sahel primarily as a bargaining chip in its dealings with the NATO imperialist powers amid the war in Ukraine. It would readily abandon African workers, as it did in the 1990s, if it believed it could thereby reach a deal with NATO.

As for the junta, it sits atop the state machine of the old Compaoré regime. The junta now criticizes certain French imperialist interests, in response to mass popular sentiment in Burkina Faso and across the Sahel. However, the regime retains close ties to European and US capital, and especially the powerful international mining and energy conglomerates active in the Sahel.

Traoré, a 34-year-old officer, came to power through coups in January and September 2022, shortly after French troops left Mali at the demand of the junta there. Last year’s coups in Burkina Faso removed President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, a puppet of French imperialism and longstanding ally of Compaoré. During the coups, protesters in the capital, Ouagadougou, waved Russian flags.

The day after he took power, Traoré gave a televised speech which did not cut ties with Paris but declared he would seek an additional partnership with Moscow. Referring to the bloody war France had waged in the Sahel as a “partnership” with the Burkinabè military, Traoré said:

“The French have long been our partners, but we could have other partners now to support us. We are in fact in a partnership with Russia. We need to strengthen it.”

Three months later, the Burkinabè junta ultimately requested that French troops leave the country.

Traoré then traveled to Russia for talks with President Vladimir Putin at the July Russian-Africa summit in Saint Petersburg. This came just after protests in Niger, the country in the Francophone Sahel with the largest population and the most strategic uranium and oil reserves, led to the installation of a military junta in Niger via a coup on July 26. After mass protests outside NATO’s main military base in Niger, the junta has now asked French troops to leave its territory.

Speaking to Putin in Saint Petersburg, Traoré again hailed cooperation with Russia but also stressed that he views French imperialism not as an oppressor of working people and youth in Burkina Faso, but as a “traditional partner.”

He said, “Let me assure you that our people support you and our government. You talked about the Russian Embassy, the Soviet Embassy that was closed in 1992, but we have already taken a number of steps to reopen it. I hope this will be done as soon as possible, whether it is an embassy or a Russian military mission. At present, our subregion is going through difficult times. It has found itself in a zone of turbulence. We want to change our policy. Some of our traditional partners are turning their back on us, and we see who our true friend is.”

This is a more or less overt admission that, unlike workers and youth across the Sahel who want to expel imperialism from Africa, the Burkinabè junta is seeking to maneuver between the imperialist powers and the Kremlin. It is not leading, but rather blocking a struggle against imperialism.

This poses enormous dangers for the working class in the Sahel. Some of the issues raised by Putin’s alliance with regimes in the Sahel emerged this week, in reports that the Kremlin may provide security for the Niger junta. RIA Novosti cited a Russian intelligence report analyzing Washington’s plans to intervene against pro-Russian regimes in Africa and referring to CIA targeting of pro-Soviet African bourgeois nationalist figures in the 20th century:

“The White House is working on different options to ‘reinforce democracy’ in Niger. It does not support doing this via an intervention of ECOWAS, which has close ties with Paris. The Americans consider the physical elimination of ‘putschists’ who count upon the support of the majority of the population as a more ‘effective’ option. ...

“Starting in the 1960s, the Americans have sought to ‘provide’ the African continent with strong national leaders. The CIA notably contributed to the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, the toppling of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, and the arrest of Nelson Mandela in South Africa.”

Today, the imperialist powers are doubtless seeking allies and support inside the region’s ruling elites, to plot wars and the installation of new dictatorships to crush the anti-imperialist mobilization of workers and youth.

In the 20th century, they found anti-communist dictators like Mobutu Sese Seko, who led the ouster and murder of Lumumba in 1960, or Compaoré, who ousted Sankara. Ruling circles in Africa were terrified that the social promises to the population made by figures like Lumumba or Sankara cut across their privileges and ties to imperialism. This took place, moreover, at a time when the African bourgeois regimes were much further to the left. Figures like Lumumba or Sankara were popular internationally and made a far stronger social and political appeal than the leaders of today’s juntas in the Sahel.

The decisive question is a politically independent, Trotskyist strategy for unifying the working class internationally in struggle against imperialism and war. This is the great social force that can and must be mobilized in strikes and mass protests to cut across the counterrevolutionary schemes of imperialism and its local political allies. But this means overthrowing the bankrupt, national capitalist framework which the juntas and the Moscow regime seek to impose on the class struggle.

Mobilizing the revolutionary energy of workers and youth across Africa against imperialism requires making a political break with the national military juntas backed by Moscow, unifying workers and oppressed rural masses across Africa with their class brothers and sisters in America and Europe in a struggle against capitalism and for socialism.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact