Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso form alliance against French invasion threat

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The Sahel countries of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger signed a defense pact on September 16, establishing a military alliance called the Alliance of Sahel States (AES in French). The three heads of state—Assimi Goita of Mali, Ibrahim Traoré of Burkina Faso and Abdourahamane Tiani of Niger—met in the capital of Mali, Bamako, to sign the AES charter.

Named after a region shared by the three countries, the "Charter of Liptako-Gourma" pledges "to establish an architecture of collective defense and mutual assistance for the benefit of our populations. Any attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of one or more contracting parties shall be considered as an aggression against the other parties and shall give rise to a duty of assistance and relief of all parties, individually or collectively, including the use of armed force to restore and ensure security within the area covered by the Alliance."

The alliance is aimed against the threat that nearby countries in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) could invade AES countries with French support. After a decade-long French war in Mali that led to bloodshed across the Sahel, mass protests and military coups forced out French-backed governments in the three countries, which are all former French colonies. French officials have retaliated by threatening to support a military intervention by ECOWAS states such as Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Togo.

The AES treaty points to the growing danger that the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine could spread into large-scale warfare across Africa. Indeed, the AES states have all sought closer military ties and advice from Russia or Russian forces like the Wagner militia group after cutting off military ties to France. The threat of an AES-ECOWAS war is therefore rising in line with the broader tensions internationally between France and NATO, on the one hand, and Russia on the other.

The junta that seized power in Niger on July 26 set a deadline for the end of August for French troops, as well as the French ambassador, to leave the country. French President Emmanuel Macron, acting with unabashed neocolonial arrogance, has persistently refused to do this. Macron also refuses to recognize the Nigerien military junta that toppled President Mohamed Bazoum.

Macron has consistently insisted that the discredited French puppet President Bazoum and the presence of the French military in Niger are legitimate, despite mass protests by working people and youth against French and NATO troops in Niger and across the region.

Niger's military junta has also accused France of sending troops and military equipment to the West African countries of Benin, Ivory Coast and Senegal to invade Niger and overthrow the military regimes in Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali.

"As part of war preparations for aggression against Niger, France continues to deploy its forces in several ECOWAS countries and is considering it in collaboration with this organization," declared the spokesman of Niger's military regime, Colonel-Major Amadou Abdramane.

Rejecting these accusations, French President Emmanuel Macron issued a bellicose statement saying, "We do not recognize any legitimacy in the statements of the junta in Niger."

The military juntas that rule the AES do not oppose imperialism or the NATO alliance, despite the explosive anger among workers and youth against imperialism. Amid mass protests, the juntas have selectively criticized France, the former colonial power

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implicated in much of the bloodshed in the region. But Washington has negotiated an agreement with Niger's military junta and resumed fighter and drone air operations in Niger from Air Base 201, located in the northern city of Agadez. This places US forces close to Niger’s strategic uranium mines.

The policy of the juntas in the AES countries, of criticizing France but cutting back-channel deals with NATO, aims to block the emergence of an independent movement in the working class and youth that would oppose both imperialism and its allies in the African bourgeoisie. This bankrupt and reactionary policy is in fact only dragging the Sahel and all of Africa deeper into the maelstrom of the growing global war.

Paris, Washington and the entire NATO alliance are increasingly angry at the limited diplomatic overtures to Moscow made by the juntas in the three AES states. As they wage war against Russia in Ukraine, the NATO imperialist powers are moving towards ever more drastic and bloody methods to crush Russian influence around the world.

Currently, the three Sahel countries are suspended from ECOWAS and face draconian sanctions imposed by wealthier ECOWAS states, led by Nigeria. Border closures and economic sanctions against these landlocked countries are driving millions into poverty.

The three AES member states have resolved not to resort to threats or aggression against each other—specifically, not to blockade each other’s ports, roads, coasts or strategic infrastructure. “Our priority is the fight against terrorism in the three countries,” Mali's Defense Minister Abdoulaye Diop told reporters about the deal.

The Liptako-Gourma region, where the borders of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger meet, has been hit by Islamist terror attacks in recent years. It is well known in this region that NATO armed Islamist militias as its proxy forces in its 2011 war in Libya. Officials in the AES countries have accused France of secretly aiding Islamist groups in the Sahel, in that way creating a pretext to keep French troops in the region in the name of fighting Islamist terrorism.

The Malian military junta is continuing to criticize the Macron government along these lines. Last year, in a letter to the head of the United Nations Security Council, Mali's foreign affairs minister, Abdoulaye Diop, said Mali’s “airspace has been breached more than 50 times this year, mostly by French forces using drones, military helicopters and fighter jets. These flagrant violations of Malian airspace were used by France to collect information for terrorist groups operating in the Sahel and to drop arms and ammunition to them.’’

Abdoulaye Diop finally warned that Mali reserves the right to defend itself if this strategy continues, which undermines the stability and security of the country.

The entire history of former colonial countries shows, however, that the struggle against imperialist provocations cannot be waged without mobilizing workers and youth against the capitalist class, which is organically tied to imperialism. The struggle against imperialism is not only a military struggle, but above all a class struggle. The decisive question is building a mass anti-war movement in the working class, across Africa, in Europe and internationally, to halt the war and end the capitalist system from which imperialism emerges.

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