



## Security in the Sahel

# NIGER COUP FORCES A RETHINK OF EU AND US SECURITY STRATEGIES

For a decade the European Union (EU) and the United States saw Niger as their most valuable and cooperative partner in the Sahel, but the military coup that struck Niger in 2023 changed that. As European states rethink their options in the Sahel, an understanding of what went wrong in Niger can shed light on how to rethink security assistance in the Sahel and in coastal West Africa.

‘Last man standing, last chance’ is how a European diplomat described Niger’s regional status less than two weeks before the coup that ousted President Mohamed Bazoum on 26 July 2023.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Build trust and deeper connections within security force and government assistance to enhance situational awareness and ensure strong ties when political circumstances change.
- Formulate coherent security offers, responsive to the needs of partner governments, and avoid duplicating efforts among assistance providers.
- Privilege ongoing political engagement with Sahelian governments to maintain influence, while planning a long-term strategy for the region that incorporates lessons learned.

The French departure from Mali in late 2022 and Burkina Faso in 2023, along with increasing pressure on United Nations forces and the European civilian and security training missions EU Training Mission (EUTM) and EU Capacity Assistance Programme (EUCAP) in Mali, left Niger as the last stronghold for the EU and international community to maintain regional counterterrorism operations and influence with a willing partner. This shift raised concerns that the relatively better security situation in Niger, compared to its central Sahelian neighbours, was at risk should Niger falter in its security stance and commitments and, since the coup, many of the worst fears of European and American actors have come true.

Attacks have increased, with some of them disturbingly close to Niger's capital Niamey. The Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (CNSP), the military junta which assumed control after the coup, swiftly cut ties with the country's prior security partnerships, opting for a different direction that includes Russian trainers, equipment and possibly other security assistance, although there is no evidence that Russia had a hand in the coup itself. Thus far this presence is significantly smaller than in Mali, where Russian-financed mercenaries operate in significant numbers.

Most strikingly, French soldiers were ordered to leave the country within weeks of the coup. Following an unsuccessful meeting between a high-level American delegation and Nigérien junta leaders in March 2024, American forces were also pushed out, with their withdrawal to be completed by September 2024.

### **Diverse partnerships, rising sovereignty**

For more than a decade Niger has maintained a subtly different security relationship to the international community than its neighbours, Mali and Burkina Faso, have.

Before the 2023 coup, members of the international community and Nigérien security sources made it clear that Niger's preference was for bilateral rather than multilateral security assistance ties.

Niger's military has shown a high degree of professionalism and willingness to engage with training and assistance programmes, earning praise from foreign partners, including the US, for their cooperation. This perceived military competence, coupled with a positive impression of the country's civilian leadership under former presidents Mahamadou Issoufou and Mohamed Bazoum, contributed to the widespread notion of 'Fortress Niger' before the July 2023 coup.

However, Niger's strong military culture and relatively weak and fluid governing structures created a significant risk of instability and political disruption. The 2023 coup was Niger's fifth since independence in 1960, and it was driven both by immediate and deeper underlying motives.

The coup, led by General Abderrahmane Tchiani, appeared to be motivated by short-term concerns, including that Tchiani feared scrutiny by an ongoing anticorruption investigative effort and potential replacement. However, the quick alignment of the

### **Security Cooperation in Mali and Niger until 2023**

- In Mali security assistance primarily came from a few main partners, with other forms of security assistance integrated into broader international missions such as the French Operation Barkhane, the UN Integrated Stabilization Mission for Mali (MINUSMA), and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions.
- In Niger the US, France and the EU maintained significant military and security force assistance presences, although not on the scale of the French and UN presence in Mali. Additionally, several smaller military missions operated alongside these larger forces, including deployments of several hundred Italian soldiers as well as smaller contingents of special forces from Germany, Belgium, Canada and other countries that engaged in regular training partnerships.



Supporters of the Nigerian military junta CNSP, which assumed control after the coup, hold up Niger's national flag as well as Russia's national flag. CNSP swiftly cut ties with the country's prior security partnerships after the coup opting for a closer cooperation with Russia. Photo: Afp Photo/AFP/Ritzau Scanpix

military hierarchy and former senior officers like General Salifou Mody reveals a deeper discontent with Bazoum's leadership. Despite internal disagreements, these senior leaders were able to coalesce quickly to avoid bloodshed.

This rapid transition to military rule also reflects a pervasive attitude within Niger's officer corps dating back decades. As expressed by a senior officer in 2013, the commitment to 'regulate' perceived democratic excess is seen by the army as part of its republican duty.

#### **Pre-coup perceptions of foreign partners in Niger**

Interviews conducted in Niger before and after the coup reveal how Nigérien security actors perceived their Western counterparts prior to the coup d'état, as well as how Western partners often misunderstood this 'last bastion' of their regional interventions in the Sahel.

One clear finding from interviews conducted in July 2023 just before the coup was the significant gap

between how Western actors in Niger perceived their position and how Nigérien actors viewed their own government and external partners. European and American diplomats expressed measured confidence in Bazoum's government, showing little concern about a potential coup, despite its looming threat.

Discussions with Nigérien observers, military officers and security experts revealed a more critical array of views. Unlike their Western counterparts, Nigérien interviewees offered a nuanced view of the country's politics, emphasising concerns that Issoufou was clashing with Bazoum in private, with Issoufou laying the groundwork to reclaim power or influence Niger's political direction.

Nigérien and foreign partners also expressed divergent views about Niger's military partnerships and how Nigérien security forces viewed them. Meanwhile, European Union and US military officials often depicted their relationships with Nigérien counterparts as largely functional, believing that Nigérien forces viewed foreign cooperation and assistance favourably.

““ Western partners often misunderstood this  
'last bastion' of their regional interventions  
in the Sahel. ””

Some Nigérien officers expressed appreciation for this assistance, frequently couched in the idea that, as one senior officer put it, 'no one can fight this war alone.'

However, based on their experiences with different European and American interventions, other Nigérien officials and officers were more critical and dismissive, particularly towards EUCAP.

According to one senior officer, views varied significantly depending on educational level and rank within the security forces. He said that while some senior military members appreciated the assistance provided by France and the United States, others remained suspicious of French interference in Nigérien politics. Junior officers and enlisted personnel were more prone to 'populist' ideas opposing the Western military presence in Niger and the Sahel. Interviewees said that rumours were circulating among the ranks (without evidence) that French troops were conducting

operations independently of their Nigérien partners. This fuelled deep-seated mistrust and baseless suspicion that French forces were in fact supporting jihadist groups.

These interview responses do not cover all aspects of the relationship between Niger and its foreign partners before the coup but they do illustrate a gap between Western perceptions of Niger and how Nigérien security and government officials saw their erstwhile partners. They help explain how and why Niger's foreign partnerships, built up over more than a decade, could be so quickly swept aside in favour of new regional and geopolitical realities following the 2023 coup. This suggests that ongoing and long-term engagement that is consistent in resourcing and personnel, and that shows a commitment to partnership at all levels of cooperation could help overcome the region's tumultuous politics.

*The brief is a part of the Carlsberg-funded research project 'In War Without Allies: The EU's new role in global security'.*

**Author: Andrew Lebovich, postdoc, DIIS, [alebovich@clingedael.org](mailto:alebovich@clingedael.org)**

Cover photo: Afp Photo/AFP/Ritzau Scanpix

All DIIS Policy Briefs are printed on Ecolabel and FSC certified paper

