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A new military strategy of French neocolonialism in Africa: Reorganizing under the cover retreat

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General Thierry Burkhard, Chief of the French Armed Forces General Staff, with General Lassina Doumbia, Chief of the Ivorian Armed Forces. Photo: Chief of the French Armed Forces General Staff / X

In his New Year's address, Alassane Ouattara, president of Ivory Coast since 2010—when he took power with the aid of French military intervention—announced, “We have decided on the coordinated and organized withdrawal of French forces” from the country.

However, his address didn't mention terminating the 1961 military agreements with France. These “agreements are at the root of the problem. As long as these agreements exist, France will be able to use them to carry out military maneuvers or intervene at the request of its servants in power in Ivory Coast,” general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist Party of Ivory Coast (PCRCI), Achy Ekissi, told Peoples Dispatch.

The only concrete commitment made by Ouattara in his speech was that “the camp of the 43rd BIMA, the Marine Infantry Battalion of Port-Bouët, will be handed over to the Ivorian Armed Forces as of January 2025.”

Originally known as the 43rd Infantry Regiment, and established in 1914 as a detachment of the French colonial army in Ivory Coast, this battalion served France “during both world wars, the Indochina War, and the Algerian War. In 1978, it was renamed the 43rd BIMA without altering its primary mission: safeguarding imperialist interests, particularly those of France, monitoring neocolonial regimes, and intervening militarily when necessary to uphold the neocolonial order,” PCRCI said in a statement.

Directly under French command, this battalion “is one of the visible faces of French domination in Ivory Coast,” which the former colonial power needs to invisibilize to salvage the last few military footholds it has left in its former colonies in the West African region.

France reorganizing toward ‘a less entrenched, less exposed model’ of military deployment

“We have bases in Senegal, Chad, Ivory Coast, and Gabon. They are located in capital cities and sometimes even within expanding urban areas, making their footprint and visibility increasingly difficult to manage. We will need to adapt our base structure to reduce vulnerabilities, following a less entrenched, less exposed model,” General Thierry Burkhard, Chief of Staff of the French Armed Forces, reckoned in January 2024.

By then, France had lost its major bases in the region. Amid a wave of protests against France’s continued economic and military domination of its former colonies, the regimes it had backed in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger were removed by coups, supported by the anti-colonial movements.

The popularly supported military governments replacing them ordered the French troops out. Enduring sanctions, threats of a France-backed military invasion, and attacks by terror groups it allegedly supports, the three neighboring countries united to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

Reenergized by their success, the popular movements in other countries listed by Burkhard were growing, posing an increased threat to the French bases and its allied regimes, increasingly perceived as French puppets in the region.

Less than three months after the general had stressed the need for a “less entrenched, less exposed model” of French military deployment in this region, Macky Sall, who was then Senegal’s France-backed president, was ousted by popular vote in the March 2024 election. Promising to free Senegal from the yoke of French neocolonialism, the then-opposition leader Bassirou Diomaye Faye won the election, despite preelection violence and a crackdown by Sall’s government.

“Senegal is an independent country, it is a sovereign country and sovereignty does not accept the presence of [foreign] military bases,” President Diomaye [told](#) AFP in late November 2024. French military foothold in Senegal, the first in General Burkhard’s list of four former colonies where the last of its military bases were to be salvaged, is all but lost. Diomaye announced in his [New Year speech](#) that he had instructed his defense minister to draft a new policy ensuring the withdrawal of all foreign troops in 2025.

Electoral threat to French interests in Ivory Coast

“France does not want to find itself in a situation like in Senegal, where the pro-imperialist camp was wiped out by Pan-Africanists” in the election, Ekissi [explains](#). Ivory Coast’s former President Laurent Gbagbo, who was bombed out of office by the French military in 2011 to bring Ouattara to power, is challenging Ouattara in the presidential election due in October 2025.

Ekissi described Gbagbo as a socialist who was “sometimes anti-imperialist and Pan-Africanist, but hesitant in directly combating French interests” during his presidency from 2000 to 2010. Anti-imperialism directed against France was not a part of the populist politics in the early years of his rule. Such politics was mostly limited to the small Communist Party, which was founded in 1990. But that was about to change.

Soon after Gbagbo took office in 2000, the Socialist Party-led coalition running the French government lost power in 2002. “The liberal wing of French imperialism, which had come to power, could not allow Gbagbo, a socialist, to lead the most important French neocolony in West Africa,” [added](#) Ekissi.

Civil war

Taking advantage of the discontent that had been brewing in the Muslim north, which had for decades felt marginalized by the Christian south, France helped Ouattara organize an armed rebellion in 2002.

After serving as the prime minister during the last three years of the one-party France-backed dictatorship of Félix Houphouët-Boigny—president of the country since independence in 1960 until his death in 1993—Ouattara had been marginalized in the succession race within the ruling party, which he then lost to Gbagbo in the 2000 election.

Following a five-year stint in the IMF as its deputy managing director from 1994 to 1999, Ouattara returned to domestic politics by starting a civil war in 2002 and dividing Ivory Coast’s army.

In the meantime, French troops “positioned themselves between the two armies, splitting Ivory Coast into two.” Repressing anti-French protests with massacres that killed hundreds in 2002 and again in 2004, French troops positioned themselves to become the key player in the crisis, which ended with the ouster of Gbagbo in 2011.

The election in 2010, in which Ouattara contested against Gbagbo, was “manipulated by France,” Ekissi maintained. Defecting to Ouattara’s base at a hotel in the capital Abidjan, guarded by French troops under the UN’s cover, the election commission’s president announced that Ouattara had won with 54.1 percent of the vote.

However, the country’s Constitutional Council declared the announcement as “invalid” as it was made after the deadline had expired. It thus reversed the verdict in favor of Gbagbo, citing “irregularities” in the results submitted by the election commission.

French bombardment of Ivory Coast’s presidential palace

In the months after Gbagbo’s swearing-in ceremony in late 2010, French troops, operating mainly from the 43rd BIMA, killed thousands of soldiers and protesting civilians defending Gbagbo, Ekissi recalled. Finally bombing the presidential palace in April 2011, France helped Ouattara’s forces capture Gbagbo.

Accused of crimes against humanity, Gbagbo became the first former head of state to be tried at the time in the International Criminal Court (ICC) in Hague. Almost eight years after his arrest, he was [acquitted in 2019](#). The prosecutors’ appeal against his acquittal did not succeed. The ICC [upheld his acquittal](#) in 2021, following which he returned to Ivory Coast.

In March 2024, Gbagbo declared his candidacy for the presidential election in October 2025. The popular support he enjoys today is “unequivocal,” [said](#) Ekissi. And the popular movement against France is today stronger than ever before.

In the early years of Gbagbo’s administration, after the civil war broke out in 2002, “people had already come to understand the full extent of France’s ruthlessness, criminality, and manipulations,” Ekissi [explained](#).

The anti-imperialist politics had begun to spill out of the confines of the left and consciously pan-Africanist organizations and into the populist domain. But the “hesitant leaders” of Gbagbo’s party “had not allowed it to flourish.”

‘A rallying cry of the Ivorian people’

However, after 2011, following France’s bombardment of the presidential palace and killing of Ivory Coast’s soldiers and civilian protesters, “the call for the unconditional withdrawal of French troops from Ivory Coast has become a rallying cry of the Ivorian people,” [maintained](#) the PCRCI.

“Pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist victories in the AES countries have further galvanized the movement against France in Ivory Coast,” [added](#) Ekissi. Ouattara’s “imprisonment of human rights activists visiting Mali, Burkina Faso, or Niger for up to six months,” has not succeeded in quelling the growing domestic popularity of the AES example. “Today, even the right wing or so-called centrist parties, historically opposed to any emancipatory struggle, dare not openly attack” the AES countries.

The demand for French withdrawal, initially championed only by the communists and Pan-Africanists, is now being raised by all major opposition parties. After Gbagbo emerged as a credible electoral threat to Ouattara’s regime, the government barred him from contesting.

The stated reason was that, months after his acquittal by the ICC, the Ivorian judiciary had convicted him in absentia in 2019 of robbing the Central Bank, which he had nationalized. Arguing that he was “unfairly” convicted, Ekissi pointed out that “the Central Bank had never filed a complaint” against Gbagbo.

Relying on several legal arguments, his party has nominated him despite the government taking his name off the electoral roll. Other opposition parties are also growing increasingly assertive in their demand that the election must be “inclusive.”

With the prospect of the electoral defeat of Ouattara by a Pan-Africanist coalition on the horizon, France has been unable to find a replacement for him, Ekissi [explained](#). “It could accompany Ouattara in his madness to win these elections in blood. But this is a big risk, against which Senegal’s result is a warning.”

Feigning a retreat to confuse the sovereignty movement

Instead, France is feigning a retreat in an attempt to “confuse the sovereignty movement, while waiting for an opportunity to reposition itself in the ‘center,’” camouflaging its military presence in the meantime, Ekissi [argued](#).

This decision, in line with the strategy articulated by Burkhard, requires France to get rid of its direct command of the 43rd BIMA, the country’s most visible and provocative structure of neocolonialism.

It was not Ouattara’s decision to expel French troops from this base, the Communist Party maintained, arguing that it was rather France that decided to hand over this “land asset” to the army of Ivory Coast to get rid of its visible presence.

But “there are light bases in Assini, Bouaké, and Korhogo,” Ekissi [pointed out](#), adding that U.S. troops expelled from AES countries have also set up a base in the Odienné region along the borders with Mali and Guinea.

The French army has also established an international counter-terrorism school in the coastal town of Jacqueville. It is a part of the NATO countries’ effort “to prepare destabilization operations to target the AES countries, and carry out surveillance and ‘neutralization’ of supposed Russian advances in the region,” he [said](#).

By merely receiving command of the 43rd BIMA, while retaining other smaller foreign military bases, training schools, and the 1961 military agreements with France, Ouattara is only helping “to hide its army from public view,” Ekissi [said](#).

“The imperialist power, sensing its end, is trying to protect its military power in the region with a new strategy,” involving a “minimal physical troop presence” scattered over “small mobile bases,” while “multiplying its training schools” and increasing “assistance operations,” [added](#) Ekissi.

Tried and tested in Benin

“Since February 2023, Benin has served as the testing ground for this new military strategy,” the Communist Party of Benin (PCB) [said](#) in a statement. The increasing number of French troops arriving that year after their expulsion from the AES countries set up camp next to the Beninese military base in the Kandi region in the country’s north.

After this provoked a public backlash, the French presence was downsized in the region. French troops still operate from Kandi late at night, flying “military equipment and personnel to the airport constructed in the W National Park, located at the intersection of Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger.” But they are fewer in number, and do not maintain a high visibility in Kandi anymore, PCB’s first secretary Philippe Noudjenoume [told](#) Peoples Dispatch. “Another more discreet base has been constructed further inland near Ségbana.”

New camps, which the Beninese government calls “advanced posts,” have been cropping up “along the borders with Niger and Burkina Faso.” French troops have been dispersed across Beninese camps “to direct military operations and intelligence,” while officially masquerading as “instructors,” Noudjenoume explained.

“The objective” of such dispersal “is clear: to conceal the presence of French forces, whose previous concentration in military bases inflamed local patriotic sentiments, by making them less visible,” [reads](#) PCB’s statement.

This posture has allowed Benin's President Patrice Talon to claim that there are no French military bases hosted in the country. "While technically true—there are no autonomous French military camps—the reality is different," the statement [added](#). French military personnel, in collaboration with the European Union, are not only training and equipping the Beninese military but are also directing its ostensible counter-terror operations.

AES countries, on the other hand, have accused France of using such border bases in Benin and Ivory Coast to support terror operations aimed at destabilizing its popular governments that ordered French troops out.

Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are "closely monitoring the deceptive maneuvers initiated by the French junta, which pretends to close its military bases in certain African countries, only to replace them with less visible mechanisms that pursue the same neocolonial ambitions," the AES [said](#) in a statement in December 2024.

'France itself has engineered its retreat'

This statement followed the announcement of French troops' withdrawal by Chad's government in late November 2024, soon after Senegal's president indicated in interviews that the continued presence of French troops was unacceptable.

However, unlike Senegal, Chad is not ruled by a Pan-Africanist movement-backed leader who came to power by defeating a France-backed incumbent in an election. Chad's President Mahamat Déby is a second-generation French loyalist, whose military coup to inherit power after his dictator father's death in April 2021 was backed by France.

Repressing anti-French protests with massacres, mass arrests, and custodial torture, Déby has since maintained his power through brute force.

With his main opponent from the Socialist Party Without Borders (PSF) being

gunned down by his security forces and other serious opposition candidates being barred from contesting the election, Déby won the presidential election in May 2024, with his own prime minister playing the opposition candidate.

However, his grip on power had become increasingly insecure, with mass protests aching to break out again at the slightest opening of democratic space, amid murmurs of discontented sections of the army ready to back the anti-France protest movement against Déby.

His government's announcement of French troops' withdrawal in this backdrop was met with skepticism, despite affirming, unlike in the case of Ivory Coast, that it had scrapped its military agreement with France.

"All the African governments that have successfully expelled French troops from their territories have popular support, unlike Chad, where the people have endured unprecedented repression under Déby's rule backed by France," PSF's Ramadan Fatallah told Peoples Dispatch.

Other sections of the anti-French movement who initially believed in the slightest credibility of the announcement by Déby's government are also now increasingly skeptical.

Mahamat Abdraman, secretary general of the Rally for Justice and Equality of the Chadians (RAJET), [said](#) that "France itself has engineered its retreat" from Chad. It has "adopted a new method of colonization," requiring a smaller presence of its troops while embedding itself within African militaries and government. Déby's security adviser and former director of his political police, along with his foreign minister and two of his wives, are all French nationals, he pointed out.

While continuing to exercise control through subtler means, France is "orchestrating" a formal withdrawal from Chad. Such a posture will allow it to deny

responsibility for more domestic atrocities Déby's regime may commit in the future and evade being openly implicated in any acts it may undertake to destabilize neighboring Niger at France's behest, Abdraman [told](#) Peoples Dispatch.

The fact that France is compelled to cover up its tracks in the region with such maneuvers is a testimony to the "weakening" of its neocolonial power, [said](#) Ekissi. And "no amount of imperialist maneuvering can halt the inevitable collapse of French colonialism in Africa," PCB's statement concluded.

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