

France intensifies intervention in West Africa with launch of Sahel G5 force

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The Sahel, which has been devastated by the 2011 NATO war in Libya and the resulting French war in Mali starting in 2013, is facing a new military escalation as France steps up its deployments in the strategic, resource-rich region in its former colonial empire.

The new regional force set up by Paris, the Sahel G5—comprising Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad—carried out its first operation, code-named Haw Bi (“Black Cow”) from October 27 to November 11 in the border region between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The G5 force operated in coordination with French troops and the MINUSMA, the 12,000-strong UN peacekeeping force in Mali. It carried out patrols aimed at ethnic Tuareg or Islamist fighters hostile to Paris and the Malian central government in Bamako.

“This operation has the character of a try-out,” said the G5 force’s commander, Malian General Didier Dacko. According to French army sources, the “territorial control” operation was carried out by 350 soldiers from Burkina Faso, 200 from Niger and 200 from Mali.

Since his election in May, French President Emmanuel Macron has pushed to intensify the war launched by his predecessor, François Hollande, in France’s former colonial empire, amid growing geostrategic tensions between Europe, the United States, and China. On July 2, Macron attended a summit of the G5 states in Bamako. The summit formally inaugurated the new force, which officially includes around 5,000 troops in total furnished by the countries of the alliance.

Macron confirmed that France will not leave Africa and or redeploy its 4,000 troops fighting in Operation Barkhane (the war in Mali), despite the launching of the G5 force. He said France would remain engaged in

Mali “as long as it takes” to carry out a struggle against terrorism. He gave no indication of when, or even if, Paris might withdraw its forces.

“I came to Bamako today and went to Gao last month to show you that France will remain engaged as long as it takes,” Macron said in a speech before the French community in Bamako. “Thanks to our engagement, we aim in the long term to accompany and support the national and regional forces,” he added.

Paris faces a significant difficulty, in that it confronts a budgetary crisis. The G5 estimates that its operating costs will run to €423 million in the first year. Macron has announced material and logistical aid from France worth €8 million by the end of the year; the European Union (EU) has promised €50 million, and each G5 member country has committed to contributing €10 million. France is therefore forced to ask for financing from its imperialist allies, principally Germany and the United States.

In the final analysis, the imperialist capitals plan to put the costs of this neo-colonial escalation on the backs of the workers—which Macron made clear by calling for multi-billion defense spending increases while eliminating the special tax on large fortunes. Austerity and slashing cuts to social spending aim to boost financing for wars like the G5 operation in Africa. At the same time, Macron is demanding that the G5 countries, which were already among the poorest in the world even before being devastated by the wars during this decade, to provide large quantities of cannon fodder.

The claim that these sacrifices in blood and treasures are necessary in a struggle against terrorism is a shameless political lie.

The crisis in the Sahel flows from the bloody war for regime change that NATO waged against Libya in

2011, relying directly on Islamist militias as its ground troops. After the fall of the Libyan regime, Tuareg forces that had fought inside the Libyan army returned to northern Mali and backed local Tuareg fighters, including the National Movement for Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA) against the Malian army. This provoked a major crisis in Bamako, where a coup toppled President Amadou Toumani Touré in March 2012.

Initially, Paris tried to remove the military junta of Captain Amadou Sanogo, which it forced to hand over power to an interim government. But finally Paris decided to back the Sanogo junta when it launched its own war in Mali in January 2013—which it nonetheless presented as a war to protect democracy from Islamism.

Since 2013, the French war in Mali has aimed neither to fight terrorism nor to create democracy in Mali. Rather, amid increasingly sharp international rivalries, Paris is preparing major new wars in Africa to protect its imperialist interests, including its control of the region's vast uranium mines that fuel France's nuclear plants.

These successive wars have devastated the G5 countries. According to the UN, 5 million people have fled their homes and 24 million people need humanitarian assistance in the region. Even Malian officials kept in power by French troops now feel compelled to confess that the war in Libya had horrific consequences for the region. Malian Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop called the Libyan war a “strategic error” whose fall-out was not “well handled.”

As US troops also intervene in Niger and across the Sahel, there are growing differences between the imperialist powers and also with China, whose political influence in Africa is growing in line with its commercial weight. Washington—which is opposed to French demands that African operations function under the aegis of the UN and is reticent to fund French operations—has expressed serious reservations over the G5 force.

Washington has refused to finance the G5 through the UN, particularly under conditions where the Trump administration is trying to slash US payments to the UN, and has announced that it will provide funding directly to the G5 member states. It reportedly plans to provide aid worth €51 million to the five countries and

has declared that this money would not go to the UN.

US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley bluntly criticized the French plans. “They can’t show us a goal, they can’t show us how they’re going to proceed,” Haley told CNN. “If they go back and they show us a strategy, and if it’s something that General [James] Mattis and General [Joseph] Dunford feel like is moving in the right direction, then yes. We will. But right now they’re not showing that, and so it doesn’t make sense for us.”

Amid these Franco-American tensions, the Chinese regime is providing support, on paper at least, to the new force set up by French imperialism. Chinese permanent vice-representative to the UN Wu Haitao declared that it “would be necessary to support this alliance, while taking into account the leading role of the regional powers and the sovereignty of countries in the alliance.” Beijing has also set up its own aid fund targeting the Sahel countries.

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