

Niger: A final battleground, or chance for change?

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A review of Nigerien troops in Tahoua, Niger in 2017

Jacob Sagers – Niger’s coup last week finishes a string in the Sahel: completely shaking the region. The coup appears to be initiated by military generals and the Presidential Guard, with the support of the Wagner Group, against democratically elected president Mohamed Bazoum. Burkina Faso and Mali experienced similar coups at the hands of the Wagner Group, a Russian-funded mercenary force, in the past few years. Russia has been attempting to increase its influence in the region while curbing American and French influence.

Russian actions through the Wagner Group can be explored with relational power, or its power and actions in relation to the actions and interests of other states. This coup is specifically important because Niger was seen as the last Western-friendly ally in the Sahel and holds French and American military bases. By eliminating foreign military bases in the region, while establishing its presence, Russia has the potential to increase its relational power by reducing Western operating capacity. Furthermore, relational power is more than material. A Wagner Group meeting with the country’s leaders also shows Russia’s increasing relational power, as unified responses throughout the region counterbalance fractured Western alliances.

The change in relational power in the regions also coincides with changing geopolitical codes, or the way a country positions itself on the global stage, in the region. Resentment against France, the former colonial power, over its presence has resulted in French troop withdrawals from multiple countries. American troops have also

withdrawn. Traditionally France has held a tight grip over its colonies post-colonialism and the post-colonial states actions have generally followed directives from Paris. However, recent policy changes from President Macron, Russian influences, and civilian protests are radically shifting the balance of power. One may wonder, given the last coup, will the West adjust its failing approach to influence in West Africa, and can they do it before they are forced out completely?

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