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France's Policy in the Sahara-Sahel Region: The End of Operation Barkhane and the Quest for a New Approach

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Abstract. This article explores France's strategy towards the Sahara-Sahel region in the aftermath of the Operation *Barkhane*. Based on the postulates of neoclassical realism and the method of comparative analysis, this study reveals the extent to which the plans declared by the French leadership are consistent with the practical steps taken by Paris in the region. It is noted that France's policy in this direction is usually associated with the neocolonial concept of "Françafrique," which seeks to maintain implicit control over former colonies through various means, particularly military ones. Like all his predecessors, President Emmanuel Macron has been criticized for pursuing this policy, yet he has tried to adapt it to the evolving circumstances. In this regard, the article addresses the research question about the degree of continuity in France's Africa policy at the present stage. On the one hand, it examines the efforts of the French leadership to break the deadlock of Operation *Barkhane* by implementing a comprehensive "3D" approach. However, the simultaneous efforts on the military, diplomatic and humanitarian tracks only fueled anti-French sentiment, while failing to ensure peace across the Sahel. On the other hand, the article examines the new strategy presented by Emmanuel Macron shortly after the start of his second presidential term. The latter implies a joint management of military bases, enhancing France's public image and deepening economic ties. However, most of these announcements lack some practical steps and have not prevented the further weakening of French positions, as evidenced by events in Niger during the summer of 2023. The article concludes that a negative continuity still prevails in the African policy of the Fifth Republic, which means the extension of the crisis and an inability to stop it. Overall, this situation is likely to persist until the end of Macron's presidency, with an increasing number of countries expected to leave the French sphere of influence.

Key words: Africa, foreign policy, security, Françafrique, 3D approach, Emmanuel Macron

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Политика Франции на Сахаро-Сахельском направлении: завершение операции «Бархан» и поиски нового подхода

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Аннотация. Исследуется стратегия Франции по отношению к Сахаро-Сахельскому региону в контексте завершения антитеррористической операции «Бархан». Опираясь на постулаты неоклассического реализма и метод сравнительного анализа, автор выявляет, насколько планы, декларируемые французским руководством, согласуются с практическими шагами Парижа в этом регионе. Установлено, что политика Франции на данном направлении ассоциируется с неокOLONIALНОЙ концепцией «Франсафрик», предполагавшей удержание неформального контроля над бывшими колониями с помощью разнообразных, прежде всего военно-силовых, инструментов. Как и все его предшественники, президент Э. Макрон не смог избежать упреков в проведении курса на продолжение «Франсафрик», однако попробовал внешне адаптировать его под изменившиеся реалии. В этой связи ставится исследовательский вопрос о степени преемственности африканской политики Елисейского дворца на современном этапе. Проанализированы попытки французского руководства вывести из тупика операцию «Бархан» посредством претворения в жизнь комплексного подхода (так называемых «трех D»). Отмечено, что действия Парижа одновременно на военном, дипломатическом и гуманитарном треках лишь подогрели антифранцузские настроения на местах и в итоге не позволили стабилизировать Сахельский регион. Также обобщены новые приоритеты, которые Э. Макрон представил немногим после начала своего второго срока. Речь идет, в частности, о совместном управлении военными базами, исправлении имиджа Франции в информационном пространстве, интенсификации экономических связей. Однако большинство этих заявлений, которые пока не реализованы на практике, не остановили ослабление французских позиций, как подтвердили события лета 2023 г. в Нигере. Автор приходит к выводу, что в африканской политике Пятой республики преемственность по-прежнему преобладает, что приводит к дальнейшему разрастанию кризисных тенденций и неспособности французского руководства преодолеть их. Сделано предположение, что в целом эта ситуация будет наблюдаться до конца президентства Э. Макрона, а круг стран, вышедших из сферы влияния Франции, еще более расширится.

Ключевые слова: Африка, внешняя политика, безопасность, Франсафрик, подход трех D, Эммануэль Макрон

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Introduction

In recent decades, one of the most pressing issues in French foreign policy has been the need to rebuild relations with its former African colonies, including those in the Sahara-Sahel zone. According to Boniface, every president of the Fifth Republic has pledged to restore parity in dialogue and substitute the “Françafrique”

strategy,¹ an informal patronage system maintained by the Elysée Palace over French-speaking sub-Saharan African nations post-independence. In practice, this concept,

¹ Boniface P. La France en Afrique: un déclin relatif? // IRIS. 7 mars 2023. URL: <https://www.iris-france.org/174238-la-france-en-afrique-un-declin-relatif/> (accessed: 20.07.2023).

embedded in the structural power of the collective West, relied on a variety of tools, from cultivating regional élites in European universities to conducting military campaigns (Davidchuk, Degterev & Sidibe, 2022). By leveraging defense ministry networks, intelligence agencies, major energy companies, and other entities, Paris intervened proactively in the domestic matters of prior countries, backing one administrations while toppling others, keeping access to resource reserves and market shares. Moreover, Tchernega observes that robust footprint in Francophone Africa and, more precisely, the Sahara-Sahel belt, enabled it to “retain increased geopolitical clout vis-à-vis competing powers boasting comparable or even higher economic potential;” consequently, it served to reinforce lingering vestiges of great-power status, serving as a strategic advantage in the global hierarchy (Tchernega, 2018, p. 104). Therefore, irrespective of presidential administration, the “Françafrique” methodology occasionally persisted and juxtaposed against accommodative discourse. Some prominent examples of purportedly returning to earlier practices consist of the Fifth Republic’s military engagements in Libya (2011) under Nicolas Sarkozy, Mali (2013–2022) and the Central African Republic (2013–2016) during François Hollande’s presidency.

In this sense, the presidency of Emmanuel Macron was no exception. On the one hand, during his first term in office (2017–2022), he repeatedly expressed a desire to open a new page in relations with Africa. A number of symbolic steps were undertaken, including the return of cultural artefacts from French museums and, above all, attempts to share the burden of ensuring security in the Sahel with local and European allies (Magadeev, 2022). On the other hand, during this period, the very presence of Paris in the region due to the Operation Barkhane, which was launched under Macron’s predecessor, François Hollande, remained. The continuation of the operation largely fueled anti-French sentiment on the

ground, the fight against jihadist groups in the Sahara-Sahel was perceived as merely a pretext for Paris to maintain its influence in accordance with the same “Françafrique” strategy.²

As demonstrated by the military coups that occurred in several countries in the region between 2020 and 2023, the discontent of the population provided fruitful ground for the coming to power of forces that were no longer aligned with Paris and even demanded the withdrawal of French troops from their territory. Due to a set of political, military-technical and budgetary factors, Macron’s second mandate was marked by the official completion of the Barkhane (November 2022) and a large press conference at the Elysée Palace (February 2023), at which he presented the outlines of an updated French strategy. In light of the aforementioned circumstances, the research question regarding the degree of continuity in Paris’s policy looks relevant: either a significant change will truly begin, or political declarations will once again remain unimplemented.

In the context of the failures of Operation Barkhane, it should be noted that France’s contemporary relations with Sahara-Sahel countries and some other African states have repeatedly attracted the interest of researchers. This issue has been explored by several authors, including Sidorov, who concluded that Paris had missed the opportunity for an orderly withdrawal from the Sahel by 2022 (Sidorov, 2021; 2022). In turn, Filippov identifies a range of reasons that led to the crisis of the “Françafrique” strategy, and the specifics of particular visits by Emmanuel Macron to the continent (Filippov, 2020; 2022a; 2022b). In 2020, Pérouse de Montclos, an expert from the Institute for Development Research (*Institut de*

² Antil A., Vircoulon T., Giovalucchi F. Thématiques, acteurs et fonctions du discours anti-français en Afrique francophone // IFRI. 14 juin 2023. URL: <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/etudes-de-lifri/thematiques-acteurs-fonctions-discours-anti-francais-afrique> (accessed: 20.07.2023).

recherche pour le développement, IRD), calls the Sahel conflict “France’s lost war,” which led to the opposite results expected (Pérouse de Montclos, 2020b). Bansept and Tenenbaum, specialists at the French Institute of International Relations (*Institut Français des Relations Internationales*, IFRI), various steps to be taken in the post-Barkhane phase, including establishing a clearer hierarchy of priorities and optimizing the command-and-control system.³

Nevertheless, despite the extensive literature on this topic, there has not yet been a broad analytical understanding of Macron’s announcements of February 2023 about the upcoming restructuring of the strategy, as well as his subsequent visit to the continent that followed them.

In order to address this lacuna in the existing literature, this article seeks to identify the correlation between continuity and change in French foreign policy towards Africa, with a particular focus on the Sahara-Sahel zone. This implies a logical structure for the study, which requires, on the one hand, to recall the specifics of the French strategy at the stage of 2017–2022; on the other hand, to summarize its new priorities announced at the beginning of Macron’s second term.

Methodologically, the work is based on the use of comparative analysis, enabling the plans declared by the leadership of the Fifth Republic to be compared with the actual course of events in both segments. In order to provide the article with substantial integrity, priority emphasis is placed, in line with neoclassical realism, on political and military aspects, yet without denying the importance of other forms of French presence.

The study’s hypothesis is that, in the Sahara-Sahel and, more broadly, the African

policy of Paris, the inertia of the former great-power status and prestige, accumulated over decades, continues to take place and, as a result, it is too early to talk about its “postcolonial” turn as a *fait accompli*. In this respect, according to Loshkariov’s classification, “postcolonialism” is understood as a state of interdependence in which Western countries and their former colonies exert dynamic, nonlinear effects on each other (Loshkariov, 2022).

Attempts of Peacemaking in the Sahel: The “3D” Approach

By the time the Sahel expedition drew to a close, it had become the most substantial foreign operation undertaken by the French army during the 2010s, and one of the largest in the entire period since the end of the Cold War. Four states were in the area of responsibility of Operation Barkhane — Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad — and cost around 700 million euros per year. On average, 4,000–5,000 military personnel were deployed for almost all eight years of its implementation.⁴ They were also joined by the “presence forces” in Gabon, Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal, totaling around 1,500 personnel, as well as the *Task Force Sabre* with a separate base in Burkina Faso. The objectives of the operation were to maintain the territorial integrity of the Sahel countries, combat the full range of terrorist groups, as well as train local armies (Magadeev, 2022).

It is worth noting that the French group was not the only extra-regional force here: in particular, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the European Union (EU) training mission (EUTM) were running in parallel, elements of the US armed forces were in Niger. However, it was the Fifth Republic that assumed a pivotal role as the “backbone,

³ Tenenbaum E., Bansept L. Après Barkhane: repenser la posture stratégique française en Afrique de l’Ouest // Focus stratégique. 2022 (Mai). No. 109. URL: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/bansept_tenenbaum_apres_barkhane_2022.pdf (accessed: 21.07.2023).

⁴ Chikhachev A. Still at the Deadlock: French Policy in the Sahel // “Observe” French-Russian Analytical Centre. October 19, 2020. (In Russian). URL: <https://obsfr.ru/analytics/blogs/12091/> (accessed: 24.07.2023).

the ‘supporting structure’ of any military presence in the Sahel and West Africa” (Sidorov, 2022, p. 100).

Having inherited the Barkhane from President Hollande, the current leadership believed that the key to its successful finishing was the consistent implementation of the so-called “3D” approach (defense, diplomacy, development).

As Gaulme explains, the essence of this triad is to try to resolve the conflict on a comprehensive basis, not only by finding a purely military solution, which would have been a priority during the “Françafrique” era, but also by attacking the profound causes.⁵ This means that, without stopping the fight against jihadists with its own means, France would also work more actively to consolidate allies in the region (which at the time of Macron’s coming to power included members of the “G5 Sahel” — Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso), attracting friendly external forces, searching for financing for humanitarian projects. From a practical point of view, it was supposed, first of all, to establish closer cooperation between the main departments in charge of each of the three areas — the General Staff, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the French Development Agency (*Agence Française de Développement*, AFD). Another major aspect was to seek cooperation in the activities of various international bodies involved in one way or another in the resolution of the Sahel conflict, whether the UN, the African Union (AU) or the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). According to Gaulme, a similar approach was adopted in the early 2000s by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq and by the United Kingdom in Sierra Leone, and only the latter case was rather successful.

⁵ Gaulme F. Emmanuel Macron et l’Afrique. La vision et l’héritage // IFRI. Janvier 2019. P. 22. URL: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/gaulme_macron_afrique_2019.pdf (accessed: 24.07.2023).

Nevertheless, as Phelut summarizes, in terms of France’s interests, the “3D” scheme still looked preferable compared to completely ignoring the situation in the Sahel and the rapid withdrawal of troops.⁶

Indeed, throughout his first term, Macron repeatedly emphasized the necessity of this approach at numerous meetings with African leaders, as evidenced by a number of initiatives.

Referring only to some examples, one should remind that, firstly, in the field of defense, significant efforts have been dedicated to establishing a common contingent of the countries of the “G5 Sahel” (Makhmutova, 2021). The main idea behind this structure was to ensure that the African military, having been trained by European instructors, could act as an effective force in the fight against terrorism, thereby gradually replacing the Barkhane.

The deployment of the contingent, divided into seven battalions of 650 people, was launched in 2017; when it also started carrying out anti-terrorist activities for the first time (Desgrais, 2018). According to rough estimates, the annual costs of these forces should have exceeded 400 million euros, which was to be raised with the help of foreign donors (the European Union, the United States, the monarchies of the Persian Gulf, etc.).⁷ A joint staff structure headed by commanders from the five States alternately was deployed in Mali,⁸

⁶ Phelut E. Développement et stratégie de sortie de crise: anticiper pour s’articuler sans se confondre // Les Cahiers de la Revue Défense Nationale. 2019. P. 75–89. URL: <https://www.defnat.com/e-RDN/vue-article-cahier.php?carticle=142&cidcahier=1188> (accessed: 02.10.2024).

⁷ Charrier A. G5 Sahel: les Saoudiens apportent 100 millions de dollars à la force conjointe // France24. 13 décembre 2017. URL: <https://www.france24.com/fr/20171213-france-paris-afrique-g5-sahel-mali-niger-burkina-faso-tchad-mauritanie-arabie-saoudite> (accessed: 18.11.2023).

⁸ Maxwell E. Headquarters of G5 Sahel Anti-Terror Force Attacked in Central Mali // France24. June 29, 2018. URL: <https://www.france24.com/en/20180629-attack-mali-g5-sahel-military-base> (accessed: 18.11.2023).

and a joint officer training school was opened in Mauritania.⁹

At the same time, secondly, in terms of diplomatic activity, Paris' attempts to involve EU partners more deeply in the Sahel conflict attracted attention. This fully corresponded to the EU's strategy for stabilizing the Sahel, which is characterized by "the desire to realize its potential as a global security actor, the need to limit the influx of migrants and maintain control over local resources" (Bokeriya, 2022, p. 130). Tull observes that this direction aroused paradoxical interest even among small European countries, who expected that their assistance to the Fifth Republic in the Sahel would result in a reciprocal expansion of the activity of French troops in the Baltic States.¹⁰ In turn, for Paris, the presence of Europeans in the Sahel made sense as a way to work out the preferred role of a "framework nation," one of the first truly militant, rather than declarative, manifestations of defense integration within the EU (Antouly, 2023). During Operation Barkhane, small contingents from the United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, etc. appeared in this theater. In parallel, in 2020, the special forces mission Takuba was launched, involving around 600 military personnel from Sweden, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Romania, etc. This mission was supposed to operate in the strategically important area of Liptako-Gourma, where the state borders of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso converge.

Thirdly, in addition to military and diplomatic measures, a significant manifestation of the adopted concept was the modernization

of the French development aid policy. At the request of the diplomatic department, a planning law was adopted in 2021, thereby establishing a new budget trajectory. From 2022, the Fifth Republic allocates 0.55% of its GDP to aid assistance (instead of the usual 0.3–0.4%), and from 2025 it expects to fulfill the recommended 0.7% indicator for developed countries.¹¹ The priority areas for support are health, education, the energy transition and gender equality, with francophone countries in West Africa being the main recipients of funds. In addition, Paris initiated the creation of a number of international platforms for collecting donor projects and on related issues. These include the Alliance for the Sahel (an aggregator platform for financial assistance), the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (strengthening judicial systems) and the Dinard Partnership (combating illegal arms and drug traffics). In 2020, with the support of the United Nations, the EU, the AU and the Francophonie, the so-called Sahel Coalition was formed — an umbrella format that was supposed to link all previous initiatives into a single complex and synchronize them with other areas of the "3D" strategy.

Nevertheless, as has been repeatedly discussed by experts (Davidchuk, Degterev & Sidibe, 2022; Sidorov, 2022; Filippov, 2022a; 2023), the effectiveness of the French approach turned out to be very illusory due to many chronic problems. These include the skillful use of guerrilla warfare tactics by jihadists (Lounnas, 2019; Bagayoko, 2024); the stretched communications of the French troops; the lack of active support for the mission Takuba from Germany (Trunov, 2023); the accumulation of initiatives and the inconsistency of international development projects; the skeptical attitude of Paris towards the prospect of negotiations with

⁹ Formation des officiers d'Etat-Major de la Force Conjointe à Nouakchott // EUCAP Sahel Mali. 26 septembre 2019. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eucap-sahel-mali/formation-des-officiers-d%E2%80%99etat-major-de-la-force-conjointe-%C3%A0-nouakchott_fr (accessed: 18.11.2023).

¹⁰ Tull D. M. Ad-hoc-Koalitionen in Europa: Der Sahel als Katalysator europäischer Sicherheitspolitik? // SWP-Studie. 2022. No. 8. URL: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/sahel-ad-hoc-koalitionen-in-europa> (accessed: 26.07.2023).

¹¹ Loi n° 2021–1031 du 4 août 2021 de programmation relative au développement solidaire et à la lutte contre les inégalités mondiales (1) // Légifrance. URL: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000043898536> (accessed: 18.11.2023).

the enemy (Pérouse de Montclos, 2020a) and much more. The main obstacle, as mentioned above, was the loss of support on the ground, namely, the rejection of any French actions due to their underlying focus on preserving the “*Françafrique*” order (Pouillieute, 2023).

According to many Western researchers themselves, these sentiments are now not only broadcast by the ruling elites, but also generally shared by young people on social networks, intellectuals and civil society activists.¹² In turn, the leadership of the Fifth Republic, as can be seen from the Senate report on the results of the Barkhane, initially chose to ignore the origins of the problem, explaining the degradation of its image on the continent not by its own miscalculations, but mainly by external influence.¹³ In fact, it would be more appropriate to talk about a larger process boosted the decline in the popularity of France and its policies — the growing subjectivity of African countries, their willingness to “form a multipolar democratic model and abandon confrontation between the largest world powers, like a new Cold War” (Kosachev, 2023, p. 46). During his second term, Macron has had to decide whether Paris would accept the new reality or continue to follow the old-fashioned logic, trying to preserve the last vestiges of its influence.

Outlines of a New Strategy Following the Withdrawal of Barkhane

A significant indication of potential changes in France’s strategy was the decision to order a special report on the future of Franco-

¹² Antil A., Vircoulon T., Giovalucchi F. *Thématiques, acteurs et fonctions du discours anti-français en Afrique francophone* // IFRI. 14 juin 2023. URL: <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/etudes-de-lifri/thematiques-acteurs-fonctions-discours-anti-francais-afrique> (accessed: 20.07.2023).

¹³ *Quel bilan pour l’opération Barkhane? Rapport d’information № 708 (2022–2023), déposé le 7 juin 2023* // Sénat. URL: <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r22-708/r22-708.html> (accessed: 28.07.2023).

African relations at the final stage of Operation Barkhane. The text was published in October 2021 on the eve of the next France — Africa summit and was titled “New Relations between Africa and France: Together to Overcome the Challenges of Tomorrow.”¹⁴ The position of editor-in-chief was offered to the Cameroonian intellectual Achille Mbembe, one of the developers of the postcolonial approach in the theory of international relations and a long-time opponent of the “*Françafrique*” practices (Mbembe, 2021). The choice of such a figure, apparently, was to once again emphasize the willingness of the former colonial empire to listen to the voices of skeptics and launch the long-promised restart of dialogue with the continent.

Leaving a detailed analysis of the report for a separate study, it is worth noting that overseas operations of France were called in it a continuation of the “long history of imperial ideology,”¹⁵ dating back to the 19th century. According to the text, Paris was accustomed to maintaining the Francophone part of the continent in a state of artificial internal division, thereby denying “the legitimate aspirations of the African peoples to dispose of themselves.”¹⁶ This approach fundamentally contradicts the African request for independent solutions. The authors called for at least a revision of the French model of military presence towards greater autonomy for African partners, if not to abandon this presence completely.

Over time, it has become clear that the postcolonial message of Mbembe’s report was only partially received by the French authorities. In February 2023, a year and a half after the summit and three months after the official end of Operation Barkhane and

¹⁴ Mbembe A. *Les nouvelles relations Afrique — France: relever ensemble les défis de demain* // Elysee. Octobre 2021. URL: <https://www.elysee.fr/admin/upload/default/0001/11/47114246c489f3eb05ab189634bb1bf832e4ad4e.pdf> (accessed: 28.07.2023).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* P. 86.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* P. 87.

just on the eve of Macron's next African tour, a press conference was held at the Elysée Palace, at which the new priorities of the French approach were outlined. The President reiterated the well-known thesis that the former "French strategy no longer exists" and he personally "does not feel nostalgia for 'Françafrique' at all," which, nevertheless, should not leave an "empty space."¹⁷ Based on this, he announced an adjustment to the policy, which can be regarded as a second edition of the "3D" strategy.

First, Paris will continue to support the local armed forces, focusing not so much on the "G5 Sahel" (which actually collapsed after the coups of 2022–2023), but on the "Africanization" of its military bases. This implies reducing the number of French troops on the continent and bringing existing military facilities under the joint command of African armies. The points of the Fifth Republic (in the Sahara-Sahel itself, already largely lost, but still present in other francophone countries of Africa such as Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon) will turn from closed zones into "academies," where local soldiers and officers will undergo additional training and receive equipment. Macron emphasizes that such interaction will develop exclusively on the basis of requests from the host countries themselves, without unilateral instructions.¹⁸ Paris no longer considers it necessary to intervene in any conflict automatically as a "gendarme." More broadly, its strategy on the continent should stop focusing only on the Sahel and security issues and learn to cover other regions and topics. At the same time, as the President repeated several times, there is no question of a complete withdrawal of troops anyway: the

French military presence should be nothing, but less "visible."¹⁹

Secondly, alongside official diplomatic activity, the importance of the "communication offensive" is increasing, namely the popularization of positive narratives about the actions of the Fifth Republic in the information space, including in the field of security. As the President notes, a significant challenge lies in the fact that government departments, businesses and non-governmental organizations frequently engage with Africans independently of one another.²⁰ Instead, a reunited *Team France* is needed to promote a coherent narrative that openly acknowledges mistakes and clearly outlines the advantages over competitors. By speaking with one voice and articulating a unified stance, the Fifth Republic could clearly define and protect its interests. This requirement should also apply to the armed forces, since the struggle for influence has been fixed in the 2022 Strategic National Review as a new long-term goal.²¹

Thirdly, there is an intention to give impetus to economic ties with the continent, which has halved over the past twenty years (from 15 to 7.5% of market share for France).²² According to Macron, it is time for French business to reject the logic of "colonial rent" when it receives profitable contracts simply by virtue of its country of origin. As with all other powers, the Fifth Republic will have to engage with international competition and find niches

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Revue nationale stratégique 2022 // Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale. P. 24. URL: <https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Revue%20nationale%20strat%C3%A9gique%20-%20Fran%C3%A7ais.pdf> (accessed: 18.11.2023).

²² Gaymard H. Relancer la présence économique française en Afrique: l'urgence d'une ambition collective à long terme // Ministère de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique. Avril 2019. P. 7. URL: https://www.economie.gouv.fr/files/files/2019/PDF/Relancer_la_presence_economique_francaise_en_Afrique_-_Rapport_de_M._Herve_Gaymard.pdf (accessed: 18.11.2023).

¹⁷ Le Partenariat Afrique — France: discours du Président à la veille de son déplacement en Afrique centrale // Elysee. 27 février 2023. URL: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2023/02/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-dans-la-perspective-de-son-prochain-deplacement-en-afrique-centrale> (accessed: 30.07.2023).

¹⁸ Ibid.

in which it could really offer Africa something unique. In this regard, the President is relying on the creative potential of entrepreneurs from diaspora communities, as well as on EU — Africa cooperation. The priority areas of the latter should include, in particular, climate and energy transition, infrastructure projects within the framework of the European Union’s Global Gateway initiative. At the same time, intensifying economic cooperation does not negate the need for “solidarity-based investments” in the field of development aid — this component of the “3D” strategy is intended to be sustained.²³

Given such rhetoric of the head of state, it is logical to assume that further practical steps were required to confirm his intentions. Indeed, immediately after the press conference, Macron embarked on a tour of the African continent, visiting Gabon, Angola, the Republic of the Congo, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. During this tour he attended the One Forest climate summit, thereby seemingly confirming France’s readiness to diversify and broaden the scope of its interactions with the continent.²⁴ Franck Paris, the President’s adviser on African affairs who was at the origin of the “3D” approach since 2017, lost his position, and the Ambassador to Ghana, Anne-Sophie Avé, on the contrary, was appointed to the newly created post of Special Representative of the President for Public Diplomacy in Africa. However, beyond that, no innovations have yet been observed. In particular, over the past time, the details of the “Africanization” of military bases have not been specified and there have been no publicly reported changes to the

command system of the French contingent. In addition, the new priorities verbally outlined by Emmanuel Macron have not been formalized in the form of a particular document.

Meanwhile, Paris has continued to increasingly lose its local allies: the Senegalese leader Macky Sall refused to run for a third term, and Niger’s president Mohamed Bazoum lost power as a result of a coup in July 2023. In the latter case, the prospects for France’s development of uranium deposits in the north of the country turned out to be unclear, as well as the consolidation of the coup leaders with Bamako and Ouagadougou (with whom Niger left the “G5 Sahel” and established a separate format — the Alliance of Sahel States). Against this backdrop, the meaning of the other two priorities of the updated strategy quickly began to blur, as it became impossible to discuss any achievements of Paris in the “communication offensive” and economic competition.

By the way, the situation around Niger revealed that France’s competitors in Africa are more numerous than it might seem at first glance. These are not only non-Western players, whose increasing activity the French leadership often refers to, but also the United States, for example. While Paris was forced to withdraw its troops from Niger by the end of 2023 and even close the embassy, American soldiers at the Agadez drone base and diplomats have so far avoided such an outcome. Although Washington regarded the situation as a coup, it still made it clear that it was interested in maintaining military contacts with this country, regardless of who was in power.²⁵ In a parliamentary report by November 2023, French MPs Bruno Fuchs and Michèle Tabarot highlighted the alarming trend of the increase in the number of visits by American officials to the continent, the expansion of financing for

²³ Le Partenariat Afrique — France: discours du Président à la veille de son déplacement en Afrique centrale // Elysee. 27 février 2023. URL: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2023/02/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-dans-la-perspective-de-son-prochain-deplacement-en-afrique-centrale> (accessed: 30.07.2023).

²⁴ One Forest Summit au Gabon // Élysée. 2 mars 2023. URL: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2023/03/02/one-forest-summit-au-gabon> (accessed: 18.11.2023).

²⁵ US Plans to Resume Partnership with Niger, Diplomat Says // Reuters. December 13, 2023. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-plans-resume-partnership-with-niger-diplomat-says-2023-12-13/> (accessed: 19.01.2024).

development assistance, and the strengthening of economic ties between the United States and African countries.²⁶

Taking all of the above into account, it can be concluded that the rethinking of relations with Africa remains merely rhetorical rather than practical. According to the prevailing point of view among African experts, instead of substantive changes, the Elysée Palace has preferred only to disguise its approach rather than make substantive changes, in an attempt to win back lost popularity through declarative steps.²⁷ However, as Giovalucci notes, Macron simply does not have the opportunity to act otherwise, because, for example, a statement about the rapid closure of bases instead of artificially stretched “Africanization” would cause additional tension in relations with the remaining allies and gain no support from the military in France itself.²⁸

Significantly, in addition to the African direction, the army also faced the dominance of rhetoric over practice on the part of the political leadership as for the elaboration of a new military planning law until 2030. Adopted in July 2023 and presented as the beginning of France’s transition to the “war economy”, but in the end it turned out to be devoid of any drastic innovations compared to previous analogues (Chikhachev, 2023). The issue of restructuring the military presence in Africa was discussed only indirectly, and the purchase of military

equipment, including that intended for the African theatre, will continue at the same pace as before.

Instead of a Conclusion: Prospects for French Policy in the Sahara-Sahel Region

In response to the initial aim of the study, it is crucial to acknowledge the legitimacy of the original hypothesis, concluding that continuity still persists in French African politics during President Emmanuel Macron’s leadership. This persistence is evident in attempts to preserve certain aspects of the “Françafrique” but in updated forms — most notably, via ongoing military engagement alongside involvement in various sectors such as development assistance. Nevertheless, labeling this consistency as advantageous would be misleading since it retains ties to neocolonialist connotations. Despite (or, more specifically, because of) utilizing hard power capacities, France’s influence in Africa remains fragile and appears to wane further (Fedorov, 2024).

Similar to his predecessors, Emmanuel Macron confronted a dilemma wherein classical methods of exerting influence grew increasingly obsolete, whereas total disengagement would negatively affect both French interests and reputation. Pursuing intermediate strategies since 2017 has proven insufficient, revealing their own pitfalls: the “3D” approach has failed to curb mounting anti-French sentiment and resolve conflicts in the Sahel, while proposed priorities announced in February 2023 remain unimplemented. Consequently, Operation Barkhane has undermined France’s principal asset in the Sahara-Sahel region and in Africa as a whole — its role as an efficient security guarantor.

It appears probable that, over the ensuing years, France’s Africa policy will unfold along an inertial trajectory involving increasingly intense and geographically widespread crises. Specifically, multiple countries even beyond the Sahara-Sahel are likely to slip away from the

²⁶ Rapport d’information sur les relations entre la France et l’Afrique // Assemblée nationale. 8 novembre 2023. URL: https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/16/rapports/cion_afetr/116b1841_rapport-information#_Toc256000114 (accessed: 19.01.2024).

²⁷ Donmez A. E. Experts: La France n’est pas en mesure de mettre en œuvre sa nouvelle stratégie pour l’Afrique // Anadolu. 8 mars 2023. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/experts-la-france-cest-pas-en-mesure-de-mettre-en-%C5%93uvre-sa-nouvelle-strat%C3%A9gie-pour-lafrique/2840423> (accessed: 01.08.2023).

²⁸ Giovalucci F. La retraite d’Afrique d’Emmanuel Macron // Esprit. Mars 2023. URL: <https://esprit.presse.fr/actualites/francois-giovalucci/la-retraite-d-afrique-d-emmanuel-macron-44560> (accessed: 01.08.2023).

Elysée Palace’s sphere of influence, echoing the “domino effect” — with unsolved or impending transitions of power acting as catalysts, with Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal and Cameroon being particularly vulnerable. A possible reaction from Paris may be the attempt to maintain an implicit presence through the tools of “soft power” and economic mechanisms, without resorting to large-scale military operations.

There may also be a partial turn towards non-francophone Africa, where the legacy of France’s colonial past is less significant.

Emmanuel Macron indicated this option during his first term by visiting Ethiopia, Kenya and South Africa (2019–2021), and then confirmed it at the beginning of his second mandate (the Angolan stage of the tour in March 2023). Nevertheless, it is obvious that with French positions weakening, the window of opportunity for non-Western players, including Russia, China, and Türkiye, continues to expand. Moreover, as the situation in Niger has demonstrated, France’s Western allies, particularly the United States, also exploit its failures.

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