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Interviewer: Ngenge Ransom Tanyu
Interviewee: Komlan Avoulete

Interview

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Focal points of the interview

France's declining presence in Africa

Challenges to governance and security in Africa

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Question: Why is the French presence in Africa declining? For instance, France announced in February that it was withdrawing its 2,400 troops from Mali over the next six months due to uncertainty regarding the intentions of that country's junta government.

Answer: I would say that it appears like most Africans, such as elites, politicians, activists, and the *youth* do not trust France anymore because of the lack of clarity in their foreign policy toward the continent. In one of my articles titled, "*Why France's Arrogance is Pushing Africa Further Away*", I argue that although France is still an important partner for many African countries, its influence is declining due to two main reasons.

First, France's foreign policy has failed to evolve and reflect the changing dynamics in African politics and young Africans' concerns. The 2021 Africa-France summit that was supposed to be a new starting point in the relationship between both entities demonstrated that France was not ready to build a win-win partnership with the continent. France appears to live in the past of its glorious colonial period on the continent. The unwillingness of President Macron to listen and find a viable solution to young Africans' concerns, such as France's paternalistic attitude towards Africans, the recognition of the crimes of its colonial past, and most importantly, President Macron's denial of supporting or collaborating with authoritarian regimes on the continent, have reinforced the feelings of many Africans that France is not a reliable actor in their fight for democracy. One question that always comes up is how a country that calls itself a democracy still supports authoritarian regimes on the continent just for its interest, hence denying the new African generation its quest for democratic governments and institutions, accountability from the duty bearers, and the right to freely choose their destiny. French leaders have never answered that question. French leaders display a kind of arrogance and condescendence towards Africa that is increasingly revolting most Africans, especially those living in French-speaking countries.

The second reason is the multiplication of new development partners on the continent, such as China, Russia, Qatar, the United States, and Turkey. African countries now have numerous partners with whom they can work for the best or worst. African elites now have more alternatives other than the traditional ones that used to include France. As independent and sovereign countries, they have the right to choose their partners, and France appears not to be as predominant as it used to be. An example is the hostility France faces in Mali which has led to the decision to withdraw its military forces from the country. It is also important to affirm that a part of the anti-France sentiments in many African countries are also a product of some propaganda from France's rivals on the continent, such as Russia and China.

Question: How would the withdrawal of forces affect the fight against terrorism in the country and region?

Answer: The French troop's withdrawal would certainly and negatively impact the fight against terrorist entities in Mali and the region. French troops had been in Mali since 2013, and its army is well-trained and equipped to fight terrorist groups compared to the Malian army. France led various successful operations against many terrorist groups and neutralized many of their key leaders, such as Adnan Abou Walid al-Sahrawi, the head of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Terrorist groups will surely benefit from the vacuum left by the departure of French troops. They will certainly attempt to recover the territories they had lost. It is important to affirm that some Western countries followed France in its withdrawal from Mali, such as Canada and some European countries involved in the fight against terrorism in the region. However, a few thousand French forces will be deployed in the Sahel region, especially in Niger to continue fighting against various terrorist groups operating in that country and the region. The Malian army will undeniably face increasing difficulty to protect its territory and citizens from terrorist attacks. They are ill-equipped, poorly trained, and lack crucial military equipment, such as drones used in rapid and effective operations against terrorists. And dozens of Malian soldiers perished in recent weeks in terrorist attacks claimed by jihadists from JNIM (Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin) linked to Al-Qaeda. The presence of Russian instructors and the donation of Russian military equipment to Mali by Moscow might help boost the Malian army's intervention capacity, however, it will not have a profound impact in the fight against terrorist entities, at least for now. France's withdrawal will undermine counterterrorism efforts in the country, especially in its northern part. That region could become a haven for extremist groups that can use it as a territory to destabilize neighboring countries like Niger and Burkina Faso, to reach the Gulf of Guinea countries. The recent terrorist attacks in Togo are an example of what might happen in the future to other Gulf of Guinea countries if strong actions are not taken. The G5 Sahel countries, the MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) forces, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), and other partners like the United States, for instance, should boost their security cooperation to fight against the threat.

Question: What will the repercussions in France and Europe be from the French decision have to reduce its presence in Africa?

Answer: So far, France is withdrawing its troops from Mali and retains its presence in other African countries. Most French political leaders supported France's intervention in Mali when it started. Its goal was not only to stop the advance of armed Islamist groups to take over Bamako but also to protect Niger's uranium mines threatened by Malian rebels. Those mines provide 20% of the uranium needed for France's 58 nuclear reactors; an additional reason why

France is deploying more than 2000 soldiers from Mali to Niger. Concerning the repercussions, the military coups in Mali, the death of French soldiers, and constant tensions between France and the Malian junta have pushed many French politicians to ask for that withdrawal. The decision of the Malian junta to accept Russian instructors and Wagner troops on their soil was perceived as an insult to France and its counterterrorism efforts in the north of Mali. In domestic politics, France and some European countries should brace up for more and new waves of immigrants from countries that are likely to be destabilized by terrorist entities that will grow in confidence as they will not be fighting against a real military force.

Question: What will the effects on Africa be? France based troops in Mali as an operation to fight Al-Qaeda and other jihad forces in the West African Sahel region

Answer: The effects of the decision to withdraw French troops from Mali will mostly be restricted to the Sahel region and West Africa. That decision is good news for jihadist groups operating in the area. The withdrawal of well-equipped and trained French troops from outposts, such as Menaka, Kidal, and Tessalit in the northern part of Mali creates a vacuum that will be hard to be filled by the Malian army and its Russian friends. With a poorly trained army and not having adequate means of coordination, surveillance, and intelligence, terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and its affiliates are likely to increase their attacks on the Malian army and civilians. These jihadist groups still harbor ambitions of reaching the countries of the Gulf of Guinea. This withdrawal is an enormous mistake on the part of both countries. The consequences will be devastating to Malians. If we add to that, the tensions between Mali and Ivory Coast these last weeks, it looks like Mali versus all. Mali against ECOWAS, France, Ivory Coast, and terrorist groups. The terrorist entities in the country and region should be happy about the situation. Although the tension and division between Mali and the majority of ECOWAS impact the fight against terrorism in the region, like in Ukraine, Malian's decision to choose their path to solve the problems in their country must be respected. Mali belongs to Malians, not to France or ECOWAS. All the parties involved should come together and find the right solution to strongly defeat the jihadi threat and put in place the conditions for peace, stability, and development in Mali.

Question: Why was a presence in Africa of strategic and symbolic importance to France? What has changed in broad terms?

Answer: The French presence in Africa is very strategic for economic, security, and diplomatic reasons. Africa has a large reserve of raw materials and minerals that France needs. France has decided to play a vital role on the continent, particularly in countries where these resources

are to have easy access to these resources. This is the case with the uranium mines in Niger and oil and gas in Gabon, for example. Moreover, to France, stability in Africa is linked to its own stability because of the geographical proximity between France and North Africa. France is close to African countries undermined by terrorism, extreme poverty, domestic conflicts, and failed states like Libya. Having a presence on the continent becomes imperative to France's economy and security. France intervened several times in African countries, such as Djibouti, Gabon, Central African Republic, and Togo providing military support to embattled leaders and their governments or evacuating French and European nationals threatened in a country in crisis. Finally, on the political and cultural level, "*Françafrique*" has always had a say in the politics of the Francophone countries. It has always wanted to keep a grip on the political decisions of many African countries for its interests. In addition, the Francophonie organization continues to play a vital role in French influence on the continent. French is the official language of 21 African countries, and this cultural influence also remains an important asset of the French strategic disposition in Africa. France, through its presence and influence in Africa, demonstrated its rank as a world power and it has made Africa its privileged sphere of intervention.

Question: What wider geopolitical trends are in evidence? What is the role of Turkey, China, and Russia in Africa?

Answer: France has played and can continue to play a significant role on the continent if it reviews its foreign policy on Africa. Although it remains present on the continent through its military bases, defense and assistance agreements with certain African countries, companies, and others, its influence will sharply decline. As a middle power, to strengthen itself on the continent, it needs the presence of its American ally, which itself does not have an African policy worthy of the name. The case of Mali is only a beginning. Other African countries will do everything to reduce French influence in their country, especially countries where the new presidents will be young people and Pan-Africanists. The world is changing. So is Africa. France's military bases, its exceptionalism, and privileged relations with some African leaders will not prevent it from this decline if it does not revise its policy. There is a new race for Africa, especially for its strategic position, minerals, and growing market, for instance. The competition is tough with countries like China, Russia, and Turkey. Those countries are there for their interests like any other country, hence France must fight for its place and regain relevance. China and Russia will become the main partners for many countries on the continent in the coming decades since the U.S. policymakers appear to see Africa as a faraway land with no real strategic interests. Appointing African born at the top of U.S. organizations working on Africa, inviting some African leaders for a summit in Washington, or developing programs for

young Africans is noble, but will not be sufficient for the U.S. to strongly counter the growing influence of China and Russia in Africa. The U.S. needs to be more strategic and not make the same mistakes France keeps making.

Question: Is the decline in terms of *presence* the same as the decline of French *influence* in Africa?

Answer: As I said at the beginning, France is still an important partner in Africa. Africans have nothing against French citizens coming to the continent. Many Africans live, study, and work in France and some of them have dual citizenship. However, the decline is more in the influence rather than in its presence on the continent. French citizens and companies such as Bolloré or Total continue to exercise their activities freely in many African countries. It is the influence of France in Africa that suffers the most from the French policy of Africa. For decades, France enjoyed a privileged position on the continent, which is no longer the case. It no longer has the same diplomatic, political, economic, and cultural influence it had a few decades ago. And it is not because Africans hate France. It is just that French political elites refuse to understand the concerns of Africans and believe that theirs are more than anything else. If the influence declines, certainly its presence could also be impacted over time.

Question: Will the outcome of the French presidential election affect France's foreign policy on Africa?

Answer: I do not think the presidential election in France will change anything. The problem is not only the presidents but also just French political elites, who either refuse to reimagine a new partnership with the continent or are overwhelmed by the change taking place on the African continent. French citizens re-elected president Macron for a second term. The one who told young Africans that France has no dictator friends on the continent, that *Françafrique* no longer exists while France still supports many authoritarian regimes on the continent, such as in the Republic of Congo, Cameroon, and Togo. This is President Macron's "*En même temps*" policy. He asserts that France wants African countries, especially its former colonies to become democratic countries, but at the same time, France supports dictators on the continent. He asserts that Ukraine's allies should not humiliate Russia one day, and the next day, he affirms that Ukraine must win the war. France lacks political clarity, especially in Africa. Its attitude of arrogance, of contempt toward Africans appears to be deliberate. That is the reason, the influence of France will keep declining until its leaders adopt a clear and build a more balanced partnership with Africa.

Question: Are there prospects for normalisation of relations between France and its African partners?

Answer: France has been in Africa for centuries and had strong ties with many African countries, especially after their independence. If their influence is diminishing nowadays, it is just that Africans have understood that France is no longer a viable partner for their interests and other partners can do better. I was in Africa, especially in my native country, Togo a few weeks ago. And I can affirm that France is not perceived with a good eye down there. This is the case in many African countries, as evidenced by the anti-French demonstrations, especially in recent years, in Burkina Faso or Guinea. Instead of complaining about China's practices and Russia in Africa, French elites should ask themselves the reasons they are losing their influence on the continent. Why is their influence declining? Are they not competitive like other countries? Why do African elites that are savvier, less corrupt, and more educated not want France as their main partner anymore? Those questions are simple to answer, and French elites know the answers. I do not believe that there will be a normalization in the relationship between France and Africa, except with a few African countries. However, I hope that Africa should continue to have France as a partner, especially in our epoch where challenges like global warming, terrorism, global health issues, refugee crisis, and poverty should be addressed collectively with all the development partners.

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