

Niger has cut military ties with the US: Why this could be bad for the Sahel's security

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Niger—a landlocked country of 25 million people in one of the most unstable parts of the world—recently [announced](#) it was suspending military cooperation with the United States.

For over a decade, Niger has been [one of America's most reliable](#) allies in the Sahel. The Sahel region, which stretches across Africa from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, is one of the [largest poorly governed regions in the world](#). Terrorism, banditry, trafficking (humans, arms, drugs), cattle rustling and armed robbery have thrived in the region.

In the last few years, democracy has been threatened in the region. There have been [seven coup d'états](#) there since 2020, four of which were successful. The [coup in Niger](#) in July 2023 was the most recent, following those in [Guinea](#), [Burkina Faso](#) and [Mali](#).

The juntas in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso identified three main reasons for military takeover: increasing insecurity, economic stagnation and corruption.

Following the military takeover in Niger, the US did not initially label it a coup. This was in a bid to retain some elements of military cooperation with the country. Designating it a coup would [limit the security assistance](#) the US could provide the country.

In October 2023, the US eventually called the event a coup, thereby limiting security cooperation. The US had [650 military personnel](#) working in Niger as of December 2023.

I have studied the region through a security and political lens for over a decade. Based on the research I have done, [including a paper written in 2018](#) on the US [drone](#) base in Agadez, I believe that Niger's decision to

end military cooperation with the US will have a dramatic impact on security in the region. Some of the consequences could be limited surveillance of insurgent groups, a reduction in intelligence sharing and a possible escalation of attacks by terrorist groups.

The history

The first deployment of US troops to Niger was in [2013 when 100 military personnel](#) were deployed and operated from a military base at Niamey airport which was shared with France. Washington later built one of its [largest](#) drone bases in Africa in Agadez-Niger. The base enabled it to carry out [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance activities](#), which covered almost the entire Sahel region.

Since the "Air Base 201" drone base was [commissioned](#) in 2019, it has been a major military asset to the US in the Sahel. Information gathered from the base has been essential in tracking and fighting insurgent groups operating in the region.

In addition to the drone base, the US also supported Niger with military aid before the military coup of 2023.

Why the rupture?

The first reason for ending military cooperation is the discontinued financial support from the US.

Niger is one of the [poorest countries](#) in the world and depends on foreign assistance.

Before the military coup in July 2023, the US was a significant contributor of aid to the country. In 2018, the [US committed US\\$437](#)

[million](#) to the country to strengthen Niger's agricultural and livestock sectors. The US also supported the country's fight against insurgency before the coup.

The coup dramatically changed the relationship. In October 2023 (three months after the coup), the US cut off more than [US\\$500 million](#) in assistance to Niger. This has affected the country's security funding.

The second reason is that the Niger junta came to the view that the US was no longer willing to work with it. Shortly after the coup, the US drone operations in Niger were [limited](#) to surveillance to protect US assets. The US stopped sharing intelligence with the junta in Niger, putting pressure on the junta to relinquish power.

This has hampered Niger's counter-terrorism operations because intelligence sharing is essential in tracking and planning attacks against insurgent groups.

Tied to this has been the issue of the drone base. The base is a major source of surveillance and intelligence gathering. There is, however, a [10-year usage agreement](#) which expires this year (2024). The junta might think it is the right time to sever the military relationship with the US so as not to renew the usage of the base. It is unclear what will happen to the drone base now that Niger is cutting ties with the US.

The abrupt reduction in military cooperation has frustrated Nigerien authorities who [argue](#) that the US is now operating in the country illegally.

The US is now trying to establish new security cooperation agreements and considering countries such as Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Benin for American reconnaissance drones.

In addition, the deepening of ties between Niger and Russia has been a major source of concern to the US. In January 2024, Niger agreed to strengthen military ties with Russia. This has been worrying for the US and its allies. One reason Niger is shifting towards Russia, apart from the cut in funding, is the [unwillingness of the US](#) to provide Niger with the required weapons needed to fight insurgency.

Implications for security

The Sahel region is a vast area and US surveillance drones have been useful in [identifying terrorist locations](#). If the relationship between the US and Niger is permanently severed, surveillance and intelligence gathering will be seriously affected even if the US moves to other countries. This is because Niger is strategically located and the drones flown from the country could cover large parts of the [Sahel and west Africa](#).

The fact that there has been an increase in terrorist attacks in [Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso](#) since the coup in Niger in 2023 suggests these fears might be justified.

Terrorist groups could capitalize on the situation and become more daring. Surveillance drones offer a deterrence to [terrorist groups](#).

I think it is in the interest of all the parties to engage in dialogue in a respectful manner. The Niger government accused the US of a "[condescending attitude](#)" and [trying to force](#) the junta to pick between the US and Russia. With Russia lurking around the corner, the US needs to change its approach not to lose this strategic partner.

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