

War in Africa: Countering China's Influence. French Military oversees Power-sharing Deal with US in Central African Republic

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After deploying several hundred troops to the Central African Republic late last month, the French government has overseen the signing of a peace agreement between President François Bozizé and leaders of the rebel militias that had threatened to overrun the capital, Bangui.

As well as agreeing not to nominate for another term as president after 2016, Bozizé has sacked his government and appointed rebel-nominated Nicolas Tiangaye as prime minister. Tiangaye will soon establish a so-called national unity government ahead of fresh legislative elections next year.

The political realignment underway is being driven by the French government, which aims to reassert control over its former resource-rich colony and counter China's growing economic and diplomatic influence. The operation in the Central African Republic forms part of a wider drive by US and French imperialism to bolster their strategic domination over Africa through direct military interventions. The latest involves a French-led ground offensive in northern Mali and the stationing of US drones and French troops in neighbouring Niger.

Bozizé, a former army general, appointed himself president in 2003 after leading a coup that was backed by the French government. He subsequently depended on French support to maintain power in the impoverished and chronically unstable country. In 2006 and 2007, French military forces stationed in the country launched air strikes and ground attacks on rebel militias, halting their threatened takeover of the capital and overthrow of the government. Last December, the loose coalition of anti-government militias known as Seleka ("alliance" in the Sango national language) launched a renewed offensive, capturing swathes of territory in the country's north and east.

The French government responded by more than doubling its existing 250-troop deployment in the Central African Republic to nearly 600. But unlike in 2006 and 2007, Paris refused to back Bozizé against the rebels. French troops—together with those in the Central African Multi-National Force that was formed between several neighbouring states—instead secured the capital from a further rebel advance while the French government demanded peace negotiations.

The January 11 deal, signed in the west African country of Gabon, involved Bozizé making the first significant political concessions of his 10-year autocratic presidency.

The French government is developing new political mechanisms in the Central African Republic (CAR). US diplomatic cables, published by WikiLeaks, detailed the breach in relations between Paris and the Bozizé regime. Several cables in 2009 revealed French hostility toward various obstacles that were placed before French corporation Areva as it attempted to secure the rights to mine uranium at a site in the country's south. On June 17, 2009, US ambassador Frederick Cook dispatched a cable, "French-CAR relations seriously strained," that concluded: "Bozizé may believe that he has successfully rendered himself the least of the evils in the CAR political landscape. He thus appears to imagine himself indispensable to his neighbours and the French, an assumption that AmEmbassy Bangui believes may be badly mistaken."

Another cable sent five months later was headed "Growing Chinese influence in the CAR evident." It detailed the extent to which both American and French interests were losing ground to Beijing, which was "ramping up its military cooperation, public diplomacy and development efforts." The cable noted that whereas there were only four resident diplomatic agents in the American embassy in Bangui, the Chinese embassy had about 40 employees. It added that approximately 40 CAR military officers were being trained in China every year, compared to the two or three officers who went to the US and 10-15 to France.

Making clear the predatory calculations behind the US and French presence in the Central African Republic, the cable referred to the country's "rich untapped natural resources" and warned: "With French investments moribund and French influence in general decline, the Chinese are likely positioning themselves as the CAR's primary benefactor in exchange for access to the CAR's ample deposits of uranium, gold, iron, diamonds, and possibly oil."

The US ambassador also cautioned that Bozizé "is welcoming this relationship as an alternative to more restrictive relations with the French and the West" and would likely "increasingly embrace the Chinese as an alternative to the French and other Western benefactors."

On December 27, Bozizé gave a speech in which he hinted that French opposition to the earlier issuing of oil exploration contracts to Chinese corporations was behind the crisis. "Before giving oil to the Chinese I met with [oil company] Total in Paris and told them to take the oil," he declared. "Nothing happened. I gave oil to the Chinese and it became a problem."

According to Voice of America, at the same time that Bozizé signed the power-sharing agreement on January 11, he declared that he would "work to strengthen ties with China, and to promote oil exploration and development."

Bozizé likely remains in power only due to the absence of any viable alternative for the imperialist powers. The Seleka rebels are a fractious coalition, comprising various militias with different agendas. Some of the militias were formed by supporters of former President Ange-Félix Patassé, some purport to represent the country's Muslim minority, while others were organised by different tribal communities, defending themselves against Bozizé's brutal security forces. It is unclear whether all the militias will accept the terms of the January 11 deal, which involves the rebels relinquishing control of the towns they captured to government forces.

Any breakdown of the so-called peace agreement could quickly trigger a wider intervention by France and the US.

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