As the evolution of the armed expansion of the United States and its allies before our eyes testifies, the attempts of “valiant NATO troops” to gain a foothold with their weapons in foreign countries have a similar unfortunate end. Eventually, each and everyone of them has to say goodbye to their hopes of neocolonial conquest of foreign countries, while getting booed by the local population.

Thus, similar to the forced departure of American troops after twenty years of fruitless armed intervention in Afghanistan, French troops had to begin evacuating from Mali after eight years of presence in that country as part of Operation Barkhane, an anti-terrorist effort. According to the French Ministry of Defence, France withdrew troops from the French-controlled northern part of Mali on December 14 and handed over the city of Timbuktu to the Malian military. In contrast to the panic escape of US troops from Afghanistan in August, the French troops’ withdrawal was gradually carried out in coordination with the host government and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which currently has some 2,200 soldiers deployed there. At the end of October, the command of the French Operation Barkhane reduced to 80 staff of the forward post at the village of Tessalit, located 50 km from the border with Algeria, where up to 500 soldiers were permanently stationed. A transport convoy of 140 trucks left the site and took most of the equipment and personal belongings of the French fighters to the city of Gao.

On October 15, the French Army logistics convoy also left the military base in the town of Kidal, leaving, as in the village of Tessalit, until December this year a small detachment of Special Forces in the locality.
Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga of the Republic of Mali told Al Jazeera that a ground operation was out of the question when the country’s authorities had previously sought help from the former metropolis in confronting the radicals. Only surveillance and air support were requested, but after a while, the French approached the town of Kidal and forbade Mali’s military to go there. Thus, the Fifth Republic created an enclave on the territory of the town, which later transferred to the radical Islamist group Ansar al-Din (a terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation) cooperating with Al-Qaeda (also banned in Russia), which emerged after the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in 2011, has carried out more than 60 attacks on UN peacekeepers, civilian and military targets in Mali since May 2016.

Meanwhile, Paris has previously demonstrated its aggressive foreign policy towards Mali on numerous occasions, most notably with French President Emmanuel Macron’s statement on October 5 about the allegedly “invalid” legitimacy of Mali’s government, which frankly angered all Malians. During an address to the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga of the Republic of Mali condemned the Fifth Republic’s actions in the region. He points out that Paris had abandoned Bamako mid-flight and left it alone with terrorists. Operation Barkhane, launched by France several years ago, has completely failed. French soldiers have been implicated in criminal schemes to control drug trafficking and plunder the country’s natural resources. For this reason, as emphasized by the Prime Minister of Mali, the country has turned to a Russian private military company for support in the fight against terrorists. Earlier in the world press, there have been repeated reports about the agreement between Mali and the Russian PMC, Wagner Group, to train the local army and protect senior leaders of the country. Russian specialists have vast experience in solving crises in various hot spots.

However, such cooperation between Mali and Russia displeased Paris, after which French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian threatened the Kremlin with “serious consequences” for its work in the region. Paris still considers Mali and a number of other African states as its territories and therefore does its best to prevent the strengthening of relations of former French colonies with Russia.

To counter the growing cooperation of Mali, the Central African Republic, and several other African states with Russia, in particular, with the PMC Wagner, France has decided to use the power of the European Union, which, at the insistence of Paris, introduced sanctions against eight individuals and three entities from Russia, allegedly associated with a private military company called Wagner, on December 13.

It is worth noting that since the beginning of the fall, Paris has been expressing its deep concern over the loss of its positions in Mali caused primarily by the winding down of the French anti-terrorist military operation in that country. At the same time, the French Foreign Minister and Defense Minister have repeatedly criticized the possible deployment of PMC Wagner in Mali, calling its activities incompatible with the continued French military presence.

Both Moscow and Bamako consider rude imperial statements of the Fifth Republic towards the sovereign government of Mali, imposition of conditions, and outright interference in the state’s internal affairs unacceptable. Any questions regarding the presence of private military companies (PMCs) in Mali, including those from Russia, are exclusively within the jurisdiction of the Malian authorities, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said and drew attention to the existence of countries of the “collective West” with their own PMCs whose activities do not arouse such excitement among the global public. “In principle, the market for these PMCs, the market of services that PMCs offer in the field of military cooperation, has been created and developed precisely by Western countries for a long time. Among PMC leaders are definitely the United States, the United Kingdom, and also the French Republic,” he said. During a press conference on the sidelines of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, the Russian Foreign Minister clarified that any agreement between the authorities of Mali and the PMCs applies only to the parties to the transaction.

As a thank-you to Paris for increasing support in the confrontation with Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean, Greece even decided to go the furthest in the “Malian question.” Greece’s political and military leadership is considering sending troops to the war zone in the African Sahel region to support French forces. This is what Minister of National Defense, Nikolaos Panagiotopoulos stated on November 30. He added that the possibility of such a military mission did not stem from the terms of the recently signed Greek-French defense and security agreement but the broader alliances between Athens and Paris. He explained that there had been a request from the French side for support in the Sahel, for which Greece should help. For its part, Athens expects similar support from France in the event of aggression by Turkey.

However, this time nothing, including the support by Greece, EU and even the USA, can change the sharply critical attitude towards France and the French military by African states that have long tolerated Paris’s neo-colonial ways.
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