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Kluth: Stakes of the Niger coup - another step toward global conflict

Editor BizNews

8–10 minutes

As chaos unfolds in Niger following a recent coup, Andreas Kluth delves into the multifaceted implications of this event. From being a mere embarrassment for Western powers to spiralling towards an apocalyptic slide into global conflict, the coup's consequences span a spectrum. Kluth examines how the coup hands opportunities to Russia and China, hampers counterterrorism efforts, and fuels uncontrolled migration. He highlights the role of a staffing dispute in sparking the crisis and warns of escalating power struggles in Africa, painting a stark picture of the Sahel as a battleground where geopolitics and humanitarian crises collide.

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Out of Africa, a New World War?: Andreas Kluth

By Andreas Kluth

(Bloomberg Opinion) — You can think of the unfolding disaster in

Niger in four ways, from embarrassing to ominous, catastrophic and apocalyptic.

Embarrassing, because the country's coup on July 26 is blowback for a clueless West: Neither the hapless former colonial power, France, nor the waning superpower, the US, saw this coming.

Ominous, because it's a windfall for Russia and China, as they vie with the West for influence in the region and world. Potentially catastrophic, because it's a setback in the struggle against jihadist terrorism and uncontrolled migration. Possibly apocalyptic, if it marks a slide into world war.

And all this because a general heard that he might be fired and decided instead to oust the leader he was meant to protect. That — not ideology, not geopolitics, not the world food crisis, not anything large, but a staffing problem — is the immediate reason for Niger's coup, the fifth since its independence from France in 1960.

It brings to more than half a dozen the [putsches](#) in the region just since 2020, including two each in Mali and Burkina Faso, and others in Guinea and Sudan. Chaos now reigns from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. If there is hell on Earth, it's the Sahel, the arid and wretched savannas south of the Sahara.





The Nigerien general's name is Abdourahamane (Omar) Tchiani. As commander of the presidential guard, he was supposed to protect President Mohamed Bazoum, elected in 2021 and a rare American ally in the Sahel. But when Bazoum mused about replacing Tchiani, the general showed up with his junta and goons. Bazoum fled across the hall from his office into a safe room. Holed up, he's been begging the outside world for help, even dictating [an op-ed](#) article in the Washington Post by phone.

If the coups in Burkina Faso and Mali are any guide, here's what'll happen next. Niger's junta will kick out French and American troops stationed there and throw itself into the arms of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the Wagner Group, a ruthless Russian mercenary army. Even as the Nigerien revolt was underway, Putin was hosting other pliant African leaders in St. Petersburg, schmoozing them into supporting, or at least not opposing, his war against Ukraine.

Prigozhin also showed up in St. Petersburg for [photo ops](#) with the African leaders. That may seem surprising, since the Wagner boss is supposed to be in Belarusian exile, in punishment for his [short-lived mutiny](#) in June. Apparently, though, Putin's interests in the Sahel trump his concerns about Prigozhin.

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For years, the Wagner Group has been fighting for the worst kind of people in Africa, hawking its services in return for concessions to diamonds or other riches of the soil. Putin blesses these Wagner operations and [atrocities](#) because he'll do anything to pry countries away from the US.

In that way, Putin — like his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping — views the Sahel as just another front line in his civilizational struggle against the US-led West. Others run through Ukraine, obviously, but also Asia and the Arctic — last week, a combined Russian and Chinese flotilla sailed [provocatively](#) close to Alaska.

Putin is particularly drawn to the Sahel because the region can destabilize the West in many ways at once. It has become the global epicenter of terrorism, as groups such as Boko Haram and the local branches of the Islamic State move into the power vacuums left by coups, ethnic uprisings, banditry and Wagner mercenaries. To fight the terrorists, Western countries, and notably France and the US, have stationed troops in the few places that remain cooperative. Niger has been among the most important, housing an American drone base. Without a Western presence, there'll be nothing to stop the terrorists.

Putin loves that prospect. It'll cause even more suffering and [even greater migrations](#) northward and toward the European Union, which he loathes and wants to destabilize. That's also a reason Putin has weaponized grain, which he's preventing Ukraine from exporting, fully aware that his blockade causes hunger in places like Africa.

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The cynicism on the part of Putin and Prigozhin is breathtaking. Even as he's starving other Africans by bombing Ukrainian grain depots, Putin promised the ones who showed up in St. Petersburg "free" Russian grain instead — in amounts the United Nations [considers](#) risible. Prigozhin went on Telegram to [praise](#) the Nigerien junta for its righteous "struggle" against their country's "colonizers," by which he apparently means the French and Americans.

The willful gullibility of their African audiences is just as shocking. It should be plain to all countries in the region, and indeed every human alive, that Russia is the cause of the world's food crisis, and that Putin is nowadays the colonizer fighting an imperialist war of subjugation in Ukraine.

What can the rest of the world do? Hard to say. The African Union and the West have of course condemned the putsch. The Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas), a bloc led by Nigeria, has stopped trade with Niger and shut off Nigerian electricity exports to it.

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Ecowas even issued the junta an ultimatum to restore Bazoum to power or face military intervention. On cue, the pro-Russian regimes in Burkina Faso and Mali answered that they'd then come to the aid of the new leaders in Niger. With Russians in the second row on one side and Americans on the other, we'd be in another proxy war, and another step closer to World War III.

For now, Nigeria and the other Ecowas countries appear to have calculated that the risk is too great — they let their ultimatum's

deadline pass on Sunday without sending soldiers. The US and France are also unlikely to take up arms for Bazoum. They fear that Niger could be the next Iraq or Afghanistan, or worse, that they might end up shooting at Russians and igniting a global conflagration.

As I said, blowback. The US and its allies have for years neglected the region diplomatically. Of late, Washington hasn't even had ambassadors to Niger or Nigeria — Senator Rand Paul has been blocking nominees to force the White House to release information on Covid.

Politics must once again stop at the water's edge. As Putin and Xi see it, we're already in the next world war, even if nobody's declared it yet or started shooting directly at the other side. The US, Europe and the wider West must support Africa — and indeed the whole [Global South](#) — not just now, but from now on. We have to make it easier for the world not just to stare down juntas, but to resist the dark side in geopolitics.

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