

AFRICA

From Paris to Ankara, Moscow and Budapest: Chad's Search for New Partnerships

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On 30th January, the French troops stationed in Chad completed their withdrawal. For the first time in more than sixty years, France had no soldiers on Chadian soil. This withdrawal is in line with similar actions in other countries with historical links to France, such as Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. This move also points to the very likely future retreat from other traditional West African partners of France, such as Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon. This trend is part of a significant reconfiguration of France's strategy towards Africa and a reassessment of its role on the continent, a process that began several years ago. The current shift represents a major change on several levels. First, it reflects the decision of African states to take advantage of the global landscape to free themselves from ties that they perceive as limiting and constraining. Secondly, it paves the way for a significant transformation in the regional balance of power, with both traditional (Russia) and new (Turkey, Hungary) extra-regional players ready to take advantage of the vacuum left by France. These dynamics are rapidly changing regional politics, but not always towards greater stability.

Located in central Africa within the Sahel belt, Chad lies between the Sahara Desert and the tropical savannas to the south. For these reasons, Chad is a country of significant geostrategic importance for the wider macro-region. In recent years, the country has faced increasing internal and external pressures. Regionally, the rise of jihadist activity over the past decade, instability in the Central African Republic, the lack of legitimate authority in Libya and the outbreak of civil war in Sudan have had spillover effects by exacerbating existing internal tensions. The escalation of protracted and violent conflicts has led to a dramatic increase in migration flows and asylum seekers in border areas. By the end of 2024, Chad had more than

1.6 million displaced people. This pressure has heightened social unrest among local communities, long-standing refugees and new migrants. This situation is occurring within a context that is institutionally fragile. Since the violent death of former President Idriss Déby Itno in 2021, Chad has undergone a series of transitional periods characterised by political control by the military and led by Déby's son, Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno. The transitional governments sought to ensure stability and institutional continuity in the face of growing pressure from various internal armed groups and regional crises. Finally, in the spring of 2024, Mahamat Idriss Déby was sworn in as civilian president following elections that were disputed by opposition groups and allegedly rigged. From the outset, his political agenda focused on reforming relations with France. In a 180-degree turn, President Déby began to criticise relations with Paris and in particular the defence and security agreement, describing it as outdated and highlighting the one-sided nature of the relationship, which favours the French side. Déby's positions were partly intended to respond to growing popular anti-French sentiment and partly to seize the opportunity to diversify international partnerships. Central to his remarks is a demand for Chad's full sovereignty, which he argues has been compromised by six decades of French influence and presence. Déby's statements are in line with those of other regional leaders and have received public support, including from various civil society organisations. However, personal factors are also influencing Déby's attitudes and decisions. He is becoming increasingly aware that Paris' unconditional support for his regime is fading.

It is crucial to stress that both the international and regional contexts have influenced Deby's policy choices. The global shift towards a post-liberal order encourages the search for new forms of bilateral cooperation that bypass traditional multilateral frameworks. Like other countries in the region, Chad has seized the opportunity to seek new partners and to establish relations on different bases from those with France. Active players in this arena include Russia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, which are showing increasing interest in Chad's neighbours such as Libya, Sudan and the Central African Republic. Moscow has effectively capitalised on growing anti-Western sentiment in many countries in the region. Through media campaigns of disinformation, Russia shapes perceptions and beliefs, thereby fostering a base of popular support that has contributed to the overthrow of old regimes accused of being Western puppets. These regime changes have often led to the emergence of military juntas

and leaders linked to and supported by Moscow. Russia's goal is to increase its influence in the region at minimal cost. To this end, Moscow offers pragmatic relations to regional countries and their leaders, focusing on transactional relations without internal interference, particularly in the areas of rule of law and human rights. Although he has turned to Russia, Deby remains suspicious of Moscow, particularly because of its involvement in the Central African Republic. Further, in contrast to the leaders of Mali and Burkina Faso, the Chadian president wants to prevent his country from openly aligning itself with Russia or China against the geopolitical interests of the West. It is for this reason that Deby has adopted a multi-partnership approach that diversifies Chad's relations.

Among the extra-regional actors with which Chad has intensified relations are Turkey and Hungary. Turkey is trying to take political advantage of the French withdrawal to gain more room for manoeuvre in the wider region. To this end, Ankara has long been consolidating bilateral security and defence relations with regional states, including Chad. Ankara has signed arms deals with N'Djamena, including drones that are helpful in the fight against armed groups, including jihadist incursions from the Sahel. The recent decision to transfer the Abéché base to Turkey, free of the French contingent, is part of Deby's desire to increase and diversify defence partnerships. From Turkey's point of view, its presence in Chad serves both to monitor the situation in Libya - the Abéché base is not far from the border - and to counter the spread of Russian regional influence. From this point of view, it is understandable that the strengthening of the Turkish presence should also be interpreted from a NATO perspective. At a time of global change marked by a rejection of the (geopolitical) West, Turkey appears to be the most suitable actor for an African state to distance itself from the West without breaking with it completely. A choice that allows Chad to pay lower political costs than a similar agreement with Russia. Turkey, however, is not the only actor that is playing on its dual identity, as a country that is linked to the West but that also pursues an autonomous strategy.

Another very active actor is Hungary. In recent years, the country has increased its interest in the continent, motivated by a desire to tackle migration at its source through development programmes implemented by the Hungary Helps agency. Budapest has also been trying for several years to establish a military presence in the Sahel region, which it sees as strategic in

the fight against illegal activities such as human trafficking. Following a first engagement with Niger, Hungary signed a military cooperation agreement with Chad in November 2023, sending around 200 soldiers on a counter-terrorism training operation. Since then, relations between Hungary and Chad have developed rapidly. Hungary has appointed a special envoy for the Sahel, László Eduárd Máthé, who is in regular contact with the Chadian authorities. Budapest has also opened an embassy in N'Djamena and established the first African office of Hungary Helps, with a planned budget of \$200 million. Déby's visit to Budapest in September 2024 underlines the progress made in bilateral relations. The meeting between the Chadian President and Prime Minister Orban in Hungary served to better define agreements on security and defence. Hungary's military plans were reaffirmed as part of a broader strategy to control migration. Despite the façade, the exact nature of the Hungarian troops' activities in Chad remains unclear. While Hungary presents itself as a Western actor committed to promoting and protecting European interests, there are growing concerns that its actions are completely autonomous and, in some cases, even aligned with the Russian agenda. There are also similarities between the Hungarian and Russian approaches. For one thing, Hungary is sending troops in support of a regime rather than a nation, focusing more on the stability of Déby's government than on Chad's internal security. Like the Russian African Corps in the Central African Republic, Hungarian soldiers in Chad are increasingly taking on the role of protecting President Déby. Moreover, like Russia's operations, Hungary's activities in Chad have been characterised by a lack of transparency, often involving Prime Minister Orban directly and bypassing the foreign ministry, parliament or wider public discourse. Finally, as in the case of Russian private military companies, there are increasing reports of human rights abuses by Hungarian troops in the performance of their duties. Beyond the rhetoric on migrants, Hungary is seeking concessions for some of Chad's critical minerals, including quartz, bauxite, granite, tin, tungsten and uranium. To achieve this, Hungary has decided to follow Russia's example of using military diplomacy at the service of a ruling elite.

Other actors, including the United Arab Emirates and China, have become increasingly involved in relations with Chad. This trend of multi-stakeholder engagement in Chad reflects a broader phenomenon observed across the African continent. Such developments are rapidly reshaping internal dynamics within regional contexts and influencing the decisions and actions

of local actors. In an evolving global landscape, the impact of these shifts is difficult to predict, but it is likely that they will contribute to increased instability in the medium to long term.

*image credit: Voice of America.

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