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## *France's Influence in Africa Faces Strains From Locals and Foreign Competitors*



Photo by [Anthony Choren](#)

On August 25, French President Emmanuel Macron arrived in Algeria on a three-day visit to begin mending bilateral relations with the country. Ties between France and Algeria have historically been erratic, but they plummeted in October 2021 following Macron's comments questioning Algeria's existence as a nation prior to French colonization. The ensuing diplomatic crisis saw the recall of Algeria's ambassador to France as well as Algeria banning its airspace to French military planes.

France's ongoing affair with Algeria reflects the complicated relationship it has with many of its former colonies in Africa. The French first began to establish trading posts on the

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Senegalese coast in the early 17th century and launched several expeditions against Barbary pirates and slave traders in North Africa in the mid-to-late 17th century. The French invasion of Ottoman Algiers in 1830 then transformed France's relationship with Africa and launched the beginning of French colonialism into the interior of the continent. By the early 20th century, Paris commanded control over much of West and Central Africa. However, the French Empire grew increasingly strained during World War I as well as during the occupation of France by Nazi Germany in World War II. French decolonization began soon after and was largely finalized relatively peacefully after 1960, save for a bloody seven-year war with Algeria that lasted until 1962.

Yet in the context of the Cold War, France had gained the backing of the U.S. to help contain communism in its former colonies in the African continent. The lingering sphere of influence in the region came to be known as *Françafrique*—a term coined by former Côte d'Ivoire President Félix Houphouët-Boigny in 1955. Across its former empire, the French-speaking and often French-educated local elites cultivated ties with Paris to help manage internal stability and foreign affairs in their countries after independence.

France implemented economic policies to bind the former colonies to it, including the CFA franc currency zone, created in 1945. The currency was later divided into West African and Central African CFA francs, which had a fixed rate of exchange with the French CFA franc (and later the euro), tying more than a dozen countries to French monetary policy. In addition, 50 percent of their reserves were to be kept in the French central bank, with unlimited convertibility of CFA francs into euros.

Some CFA countries saw relatively low inflation and high growth in comparison to other sub-Saharan African countries from the early 1950s to the mid-1980s. But in the 1980s and 1990s, domestic production fell and imports increased, leading to a rise in public debt. The devaluing of the CFA franc in 1994 also led to wage freezes and spiraling expenses for goods.

Today, the CFA is often criticized for hindering regional trade, restricting access to credit, increasing dependence on exporting a limited number of primary commodities, and enhancing member states' vulnerability to foreign economic crises. In December 2019, it was announced that the West African CFA franc would be replaced by a new currency called eco by 2027, and would be adopted by 15 countries, including African states outside the current CFA franc currency zone.

African leaders remain divided over the issue of switching to this new currency, but the reform efforts represent growing dismay toward French economic policies in its former

colonies. Nonetheless, French companies like TotalEnergies, Areva, Bolloré SE, Bouygues, Vinci, Eiffage, and many others have dominated Africa's energy, construction, transportation, media, and telecommunications industries for decades. Their command over local economic mechanisms has often made the infrastructure owned by these companies targets, such as seen during the protests in Senegal in 2021.

Over the past 20 years, meanwhile, China's state-run corporations have come to threaten the regional hegemony of France's major conglomerates in the continent. While China lacks the post-colonial networks that France enjoys, Beijing has entered Africa with enormous investment potential and without the political baggage of previous colonialism. And while there is little doubt that Chinese companies have entered Africa to pursue their own self-interests, they are a welcome sign of competition away from the previous French monopoly.

France has typically been able to leverage its security role in the region by both extending military support to governments in Africa and by providing direct and tacit support to coups in several countries. In 2013, France began a military campaign in Mali, Operation Serval (followed by Operation Barkhane), to protect its interests and local allies in the Sahel region while coordinating with the U.S.-led war on terror.

However, the French-led military campaigns' mixed results have been met with increasing regional criticism. And as the U.S. has sought to militarily disengage from much of the continent in recent years, this has put additional pressure on France to drastically reduce its campaign in the Sahel. French forces pulled out of the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2016 and from Mali in August.

France has also had to contend with other countries attempting to increase their military influence in Africa. The CAR's government invited the Russian private military company, Wagner, in 2018 in response to France's departure. Later, these Russian mercenaries were deployed in Mali in 2021. Private military companies are cheaper and come without the unpopular specter of using the military of the country's former colonial power. Turkey's quick recognition of those leading the Malian coup in 2020 also demonstrated Ankara's growing role in African military affairs.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's frequent criticism of Macron over his stance on Islam in France and around the world has also put the French president on the defensive. Perceptions of Islamophobia could jeopardize its relations with its majority Muslim former colonies in Africa and the wider Muslim world and could add to the discontent among France's estimated 10 percent Muslim population.

Much of Africa's comparatively larger younger populations are less receptive to residual French influence in their countries, while many of the elites who were educated in France are also no longer in power or as relevant as they once were. The Organization Internationale de la Francophonie, or Francophonie, created in 1970 to coordinate integration and cooperation among French-speaking countries, saw two of its members, Gabon and Togo, join the UK's Commonwealth of Nations in June.

France's weakening cultural influence was on full display during Macron's visit to Algeria in August. The Algerian government had already indicated in July that English would be taught in the country's primary schools, amid deliberations across the region questioning the future role of the French language.

To offset this development, Macron has promoted literature and images from across Africa and the rest of the French-speaking world, and declared the French language's "epicenter" was in the 'heart of Africa.'" While some projections have predicted the number of French speakers to reach 750 million by 2050, Macron has recognized that this will only take place with the introduction of a more proactive language policy in Africa that promotes its use and regional adaptability.

France has also taken steps to try and link the European Union to Africa. In February, France led attempts to renew the EU's partnership with the African Union. The Summit of Heads of State and Government of the European Union and the African Union (AU) in February saw EU leaders announce a 150-billion-euro investment in Africa to assist in the development of the region. But despite the coordination between the AU and the EU, France's Africa policies face other challenges due to competition with other European countries.

Italy, for example, saw much of its investments in Libya vanish following the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, which France heavily lobbied for. The two countries continue to support different sides in Libya's ongoing civil war. And in 2019, Italian deputy prime ministers criticized France for its apathy toward destabilization in Africa and for pursuing economic policies that prevented development and increased migration from the continent. With the onset of fresh competition from other countries, outdated political and economic mechanisms being used by the French, and lingering opposition to its dominance, France's Africa strategy is floundering in its former colonies and across the continent. And unlike the British and Spanish empires, which enforced their culture and political systems in various regions over centuries, the French involvement in Africa was not long enough to entrench its influence accordingly. Without a serious overhaul, Paris will continue to lose

its ability to compete with other countries and satisfy African populations who are seeking change.

*This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).*

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