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COMMENTARY

Mali ends defence ties with France: Causes and Consequences

Mali's decision to cease defence accords challenges France's role in other west African countries, which are already sceptical.

Anu Maria Joseph

On 3 May, Mali's military government announced the closure of the defence accords with France, alleging a violation of sovereignty by French troops. Foreign minister Abdoulaye Diop said: "So, as of 2 May, the agreement covering Barkhane and the agreement covering Takuba cease taking an effect with regard to Mali... which means that as of this moment, there is no legal basis for France to operate on Mali’s soil." Military spokesperson Colonel Abdoulaye Maiga said: "For some time now, the government of the Republic of Mali notes with regret a profound deterioration in military cooperation with France." He mentioned multiple instances of French forces breaching the country's air space. He recalled France's decision in June 2021 to end the joint military operation and in February 2022 to withdraw its troops fighting Islamist militants as part of Operation Barkhane. Calling the junta's decision "unjustified," a French spokesperson said: "France considers that this decision is unjustified and absolutely contests any violation of bilateral legal framework".

The France-Mali defence accord
The chain of events in Mali in 2012 – a military coup in March, the toppling of a democratically elected government, the rise of Tuareg rebellion and the emergence of jihadist factions linked with al-Qaida in Northern Mali – deteriorated Mali's political and security situation. As insurgents advanced along with the capital city Bamako, Mali officially requested French military intervention. In March 2013, defence agreements between France and Mali were signed, and on 16 July 2014, they were ratified, giving French forces the legal status to intervene in Mali. Around 4,000 French troops were deployed, backed by drones and warplanes, fighting the jihadist insurgency in Mali.

In August 2014, Operation Serval was transformed to Operation Barkhane covering anti-insurgent operations in Mali and the wider Sahel region. In 2020, the deal was again reviewed to initiate the Takuba Task Force, constituted with special forces units from several EU countries.

Mali's terminates agreements: Four reasons why
First, growing tensions between France and Mali. France and Mali had diplomatic setbacks after the Mali military seized power in August 2020 and again in May 2021. The tensions increased when the junta stood against the international pressure to hold elections in the given timeline and adopted a revised charter extending the transitional period until 2025. Bamako expelled the French ambassador when France's foreign minister Jean Yves Le Drian called the coup leaders "illegitimate" and "out of control." The standoff escalated when Mali
accused France of "training terrorists" in northern Mali's Kidal region. Moreover, Paris was critical of the junta preferring to hold talks with militant groups and upset over new speculated deals with mercenaries from Russia's Wagner Group.

Second, the failure of the French mission. Though France made significant gains in fighting insurgency in its initial stages, it witnessed a major drawback as violence spread from Mali to neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso. In 2021 alone, more than 800 attacks were carried out by various armed groups that killed thousands and displaced at least 2.3 million people. Currently, over 13 million people are seeking humanitarian assistance. Over time, insurgency layered on to local conflicts over land, grazing rights and ethnic issues. France's military-centric strategy failed to grasp the local conflict dynamics, worsening the situation. Stressing on democratic transition rhetoric, it failed to commit the authorities to necessary policies to address the underlying drivers of the insurgency. Meanwhile, the militants thrived by exploiting the local dissatisfaction with authorities and security deficits, unleashing violence.

Third, growing anti-French sentiments. French commitments toward Mali are often viewed as illegitimate, neo-colonial and violent. Anti-French sentiments stemmed from France's alleged ties with unpopular leaders and corrupt elites. With failed military efforts, people were suspicious that France tried to keep a hold on its former colonies. France's support for West Africa regional body ECOWAS' imposition of sanctions over delayed democratic transition widened the rift with Mali, which accused the former of interference in internal affairs. The series of sanctions caused severe destruction to its economy, already hurt by multifaceted security challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fourth, the French withdrawal. The anti-French approaches threatened the political foundations of France's military presence. On 17 February, France announced the withdrawal of its troops from Mali. However, violence significantly escalated after France's unilateral withdrawal, which the people perceived as abandonment, and deteriorated the relationship with Mali even further.

Recently, the junta accused the French army of illegally "spying" and violating its air spaces when France released drone footage of mass burial by "Russian mercenaries" at a former French military base.

**Termination of agreements: Four consequences**

The consequences of termination of the agreements followed by the withdrawal of French troops will be complex and challenging.

First, the adverse effect on France in Africa. With the end of defense ties, France and European troops no longer can move freely in Mali. Ceasing ties on bad terms challenges France's liability in other west African countries which are already sceptical of French intentions.

Second, the regional impact of Mali's isolation. An isolated Mali would disturb the concerted regional efforts fighting the insurgency. The governments of neighbouring countries are worried about further destabilization in the region.

Third, the Russian partnership and new paths. Russian involvement in Mali is expected to fill the void formed when the French and European forces withdrew. About 1,000 Russian officials and instructors from the Wagner Group, are deployed in the country. However, human rights allegations on the Wagner Group are of concern. For Mali, the Russian partnership is an advantage, capable of fighting the jihadists without adhering to
Western demands to respect human rights and pursue democratic governance.

Four, democratic degradation and impacts. Turning public opinion against France and taking advantage of uncertainty towards state institutions, the transitional military leaders gained popular support being better capable than democratically elected officials. In addition, the Russian partnership, not concerned itself with trivialities like democracy, is likely to make democratic transition challenging.

COMPUTATION
Wagner Group: Russia's Proxies or Ghost Soldiers?
Irrespective of the answer, the group’s presence in the region serves Kremlin's interests in Africa.

Mohamad Aseel Ummer

Wagner Group is a PMC alleged to be under Russian ownership and operates in various African and Middle Eastern countries at Moscow's behest. The Group rose to notoriety in 2014 with their involvement in the war in the Donbas region. The international headlines labelled them as 'little green men.' Wagner Group has emerged to become a major PMC in the African continent engaged in training, military and combat operations. Popular media, international analysts, and many experts term the Russian PMC as Moscow's proxy military force that acts as Putin's backdoor diplomacy channel. The Wagner Group is once again at the centre of international attention for its alleged involvement in multiple massacres in Mali and various cases of human rights violations and war crimes in the Central African Republic. The group's deployment has resulted in altering the existing power dynamics between the regional forces and their European and American counterparts that currently operate in the region.

Understanding the Wagner Group
The Group is alleged to be under the ownership of Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian oligarchy in Putin's close circle.

Image Source: Hazem Turkia/Anadolu Agency/Al Jazeera

With decolonization, numerous African countries went into the hands of weak local rulers who found it difficult to govern as they were met with strong resistance and separatist tendencies. The national armies of these countries were relatively inexperienced and poorly trained, thereby creating a need for expert military training and interventions in the region. The end of the Cold War generated a large pool of unemployed veteran soldiers with expertise in warfare and training. International interventions in the third world countries often mandate Private Military Contracts (PMC) involvements as private security is seen as a cheaper alternative for State armed forces and is easier to mobilize.
Pregozhin is accused of running the mercenary for Kremlin and its interests. He has denied the Group's existence since its first appearance and said he had "nothing to do with it." When questioned about the various alleged human rights violation by the Wagner Group in Africa, he laid blame upon the West, stating them as attempts "in order to keep the population of the continent in fear, to plunder its natural wealth and to write off the money allocated for so-called peacekeeping Operations."

Based on some leaked information in 2021 the PMC has recruits from nearly 15 countries in the Eastern European region. According to official records, the Group does not operate in Russian soil as Russian legislation clearly prohibits the privatization of security in the country. Some speculate that the company is registered in Argentina and has offices in St Petersburg and Hong Kong. Various security analysts suggest the company trains their recruits in a military facility under the Russian Ministry of Defense located in a remote village in Kransnador Krai. The Group is also accused of having close ties with Military Intelligence Directorate (GRU) and receives training from former Spetsnaz instructors. Its GRU ties can be traced to Dmitry Valerievich Utkin who was a former intelligence officer and was part of another PMC identified as the Slavonic corps that had operated in Syria. The Wagner mercenaries are spotted with nameless Dog-tags with numbers instead of names and no state insignias. The Group has no official websites or details available in the open-source that can be verified.

Kremlin is accused by its domestic and international opposition for employing the Wagner Group as a coercive tool with absolute Plausible Deniability. Having a standing private military in effect gives Putin and Kremlin enormous political advantage, being a country with active conscription for men aged 18-27, military deployment, accountability for life and answerability to causalities are strong political tools that can be used by the opposition against Putin. The advantage of Wagner Group being Russia's proxy armed forces distinguishes them from other players in the industry. Unlike conventional PMCs who can be hired and serve for the monetary remuneration, the Wagner Group operates to deliver Russian interests.

**Nature of Wagner's operations in Africa**

Africa has been at the centre of international contentions due to its abundance in minerals and resources. All major powers constantly struggle to establish their influence in the region. The continent is severely affected by insecurities caused by militants, fundamentalists and separatists in the region. The State armed forces often face increased difficulties in fighting such threats with limited training and resources. France is the most prominent foreign force on the continent, followed by the Chinese. The long colonial history and the current power relations between Paris and various African countries have taken a downward spiral in recent years amid an increased anti-French sentiment in the continent. The regional powers are constantly seeking non-colonial powers for the alliance, and Russia, with its Soviet past, appears to be a better alternative and a reliable military partner. The demand for a non-colonial partner and the absence of pre-requisites like democracy, and human rights for partnerships with Russia pulls many African nations closer to Moscow.

Wagner is believed to be operating in Mali, Sudan, Libya, Mozambique, Madagascar and the CAR. The operation extends from training to active participation in combats and raids. Wagner Group is relatively cheaper and can be remunerated with mining rights like the ones granted in Libya, Mali and the CAR. Experts suggest that the Group is also engaged in de-mining operations allowing...
them to claim over the land that has been cleared. The PMC presence has created international concerns in the past few months. The French are the most affected by the Russian presence in the region. The ongoing Barkhane Operations led by the French have already halved their troops and with the recent deal signed by the Mali’s Junta with the Wagner Group has resulted from diplomatic spat between both the countries and the withdrawal of troops from the country. With the existing plausible deniability by Moscow, and Pregozhin it has become extremely difficult to pin the blame for the alleged atrocities committed by the Group in the region.

To conclude, the Group has managed to emerge as a dominant force in the region, and this clearly gives Russia opportunities in the continent. The Russians practically run countries like the CAR as most of its defence-related affairs are determined by its defence advisor who is a Russian, with the added presence of the Wagner Group posted there to fight the separatists in the country. In its march to global prominence, Russia has been trying to exert influence in all major global blocs. With Africa in its good books, the former superpower can ensure support from the continent on international platforms such as the UN. The alleged human rights violation generates a tougher environment for the Group to operate, but the absence of strong legal regulations to hold entities like the Wagner Group accountable is a matter of concern. Moreover, with exacerbating insecurities in Africa, the continent will remain a major base of operation for the Group in the coming years. The debate, whether Wagner Group is a Russian Proxy or not will remain. But the Group's presence in the region serves Kremlin's interests and Putin's growth and clearly fills the coffers of oligarchs like Pregozhin.
AFRICA IN BRIEF
27 April-10 May
By Poulomi Mondal and Apoorva Sudhakar

EGYPT
Eleven soldiers killed in Sinai; ISIS claims responsibility
On 7 May, 11 soldiers were killed after they attempted to foil a terrorist attack on the Suez Canal. The army said five soldiers were also injured in the firefight along the Canal's eastern bank. President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said: "These terrorist operations will not defeat the determination of the country and the army to continue uprooting terrorism." The US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said the US will continue to be a strong partner to Egypt in confronting terrorism. On 8 May, the ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack and said they had "seized their weapons and burnt down their position in West Sinai." ("ISIS claims attack that killed 11 Egyptian soldiers," News24, 9 May 2022; "Army will uproot terrorism, vows Egypt's Sisi after 11 soldiers killed in Sinai," News24, 8 May 2022)

Government denies withdrawal of Tigrayan rebels
On 28 April, the Ethiopian government denied claims that Tigrayan forces had withdrawn; the government's spokesperson said claims that the rebels had left Afar were "big lies." The government asserted that the forces were present in Afar. Earlier in April, the Tigrayan forces said they were withdrawing to facilitate entry of humanitarian convoys in the region. The Afar Police Commissioner Ahmed Harif said that Tigrayan forces were present in four districts along Tigray's border - Koneba, Abala, Berhale and Mangale - despite the declaration of withdrawal. Meanwhile, the aid that reached the Tigray region, where 90 per cent people need food and health assistance, remains inadequate. ("Ethiopian government denies withdrawal of Tigrayan forces," Africanews, 28 April 2022)

ETHIOPIA
20 killed in inter-religious violence in Amhara; UN condemns incident
On 27 April, president of the Amhara Islamic Affairs Supreme Council told Reuters that 20 Muslim worshippers had been killed in Amhara's Gondar town, in an ambush by unknown men on 26 April. The Council president said three people died and five were injured when the armed men hurled an explosive device on to a Muslims who were on their way to a burial; the rest died in the confusion that followed. The attack is suspected to be linked to a land dispute between Muslims and Orthodox Christians as the incident took place at a cemetery. On 7 May, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights condemned the incident and encouraged broad efforts to reconcile communities and suggested that survivors and families of victims participate in the same. The UN official said: "To prevent further inter-religious violence, it is crucial that the underlying causes of this shocking violence are promptly addressed." ("UN rights chief denounces Christian-Muslim violence in Ethiopia," Al Jazeera, 7 May 2022; "Ambush kills 20 Muslim worshippers in Ethiopia's Amhara region," Al Jazeera, 27 April 2022)

SOMALIA
Somalia's Parliament elects a new speaker after a security standoff between police and AU peacekeepers
On 28 April, Somalia's Parliament elected a new speaker amid tensions between African Union peacekeepers and the police over the divisions within the security forces, fuelled by delayed elections. Police loyal to president Abdullahi Mohamed
denied lawmakers, the entry to the airport hangar where the vote was being held, claiming it was postponed. Simultaneously, prime minister Mohamed Hussein Roble called on the peacekeepers to secure the venue and ensure that the parliamentarians could access the voting, thereby leading to a confrontation. Following this, senator Abdi Hashi, a critic of the president was re-elected as the upper house speaker. ("Somalia: Parliament elects new speaker after security standoff," Al Jazeera, 28 April 2022)

SUDAN
Inter-communal violence claims over 200 lives in West Darfur
On 28 April, an official from the WHO said nearly 200 civilians were killed over six days in West Darfur after clashes erupted between Arab Rzeigat and African Masalit communities in the Kereneik town. The WHO said two hospitals were attacked amid the clashes, claiming the lives of two health workers; the UNICEF said the violence claimed the lives of 21 children, including a 11-month baby. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights urged the authorities to carry out an investigation. The UN official said: "I am concerned that this region continues to see repeated, serious incidents of intercommunal violence, with mass casualties. While initial measures taken by the authorities to calm tensions are welcome, I urge the authorities to address the underlying causes of violence in this region and fulfil their responsibility to protect the population." ("West Darfur: Health workers, children, among 200 killed in 'senseless and brutal attacks'," UN News, 28 April 2022)

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THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
The Central African Republic adopts bitcoin as its official currency
On 28 April, the presidency announced that the Central African Republic had adopted bitcoin as legal tender alongside CFA franc, and therefore rendered cryptocurrencies legal. The Presidency said: "This move puts the Central African Republic on the map of the most courageous and visionary countries in the world." This development comes after El Salvador became the first country to adopt bitcoin as a legal currency in September 2021; however, the IMF had immediately denounced the move citing possible risk to "financial stability, financial integrity and consumer protection." ("Central African Republic adopts bitcoin as legal tender," Africanews, 28 April 2022)

Six soldiers killed in the Central African Republic followed by a rebel group attack
On 29 April, a rebel attack in the Central African Republic killed at least six soldiers at a military outpost in the southeast, marking the latest reported incident in a decade-long conflict. Local government accused members of Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) for the attack in the outskirts of Bakouma town. The head of hospital Bangassou city confirmed the attack. UN peacekeepers, Rwandan and Russian troops have been tackling the CPC which want to reverse the 2020 election outcome wherein president Faustin-Archange Touadera secured a second term. ("Central African Republic: Six soldiers killed in rebel attack," Al Jazeera, 29 April 2022)

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO
Outbreak of Ebola in DRC: WHO rules out risk of spread
On 28 April, The WHO took note of the Ebola outbreak in Mbandaka town where two people have died since 21 April. The WHO said: "The risk of regional and international spread of this epidemic cannot be ruled out as the Mbandaka town borders the Congo River and has river and land connections with the capital Kinshasa, the Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and Angola." As of 27 April, the WHO identified 267 contacts but maintained that it was difficult to assess the extent of the epidemic. Later, the
WHO said the current risk was "moderate" for the region and "low" internationally. ("Ebola in DRC: WHO rules out risk of regional and international spread," Africanews, 29 April 2022)

GUINEA
Guinea's military leader announced a 39-month transition before civilian rule return
On 1 May, Guinea's military leader, Colonel Mamady Doumbouya announced 39-month transition period to establish civilian rule. Doumbouya said the National Transitional Council would act as the Parliament. He said the government and the CNRD (National Rally and Development Committee) will submit the proposal to the National Transition Council. ("Guinea's transition leader sets 39 months before civilian rule," Africanews, 1 May 2022)

BURKINA FASO
Several soldiers and civilian volunteers killed in two attacks in the north
On 6 May, the army said two attacks in the north had claimed the lives of seven soldiers and four civilian volunteers on 5 May. The first attack by alleged terrorists in Solle town claimed the lives of two soldiers and the second attack Ouanobe killed five paramilitary personnel and four civilian volunteers. The army said 20 attackers’ bodies were found and ammunitions were destroyed in operations following the attack. The attacks come after 15 people, including nine soldiers, were killed on 24 April in a similar ambush. ("Ambushes leave 11 dead in northern Burkina Faso, army says," Al Jazeera, 6 May 2022)

NIGERIA
Nigeria passes a bill outlawing ransom payments, and abduction punishable by death
On 27 April, the Senate passed a bill providing for minimum 15 years of jail for ransom payments to free a kidnapped person, and made kidnapping punishable by death if the victim dies. This comes amid increasing abductions of mostly school children, villagers and motorists on highways by armed gangs operating mostly in the northeastern and north-central states. The chairman of the Senate's judiciary, human rights and legal committee said that the long jail sentences would "discourage the rising spate of kidnapping and abduction for ransom in Niger, which is fast spreading across the country." The bill amends Nigeria's terrorism law and introduces death sentences for the victims' death and life imprisonment in other cases. ("Nigeria outlaws ransom payments, kidnap now punishable by death," Al Jazeera, 27 April 2022)

Gunmen kill at least 48 across three villages
On 8 May, the administrative head of Bakura district in Zamfara state said at least 48 people had been killed across three villages by gunmen. In the coordinated attack, Damri village witnessed the highest death toll after gunmen killed 32 people, including patients in hospital and security personnel. Witnesses said the gunmen also looted food supplies and livestock. ("Bandits' kill 48 in northwest Nigeria attacks: Local officials," Al Jazeera, 8 May 2022)

GENDER
Drought-afflicted areas witness increased child marriages, says UNICEF
On 30 April, The Guardian reported the UNICEF executive director's warning that Ethiopia was witnessing an increase in child marriages in drought-afflicted areas. The UNICEF official said following three years of drought, parents had resorted to seeking extra resources through dowry from the husband's families after marrying off their girls at a young age. UNICEF data reveals the number of child marriages had increased to 2,282 in September 2021 to March 2022 compared to 672 cases between February and August 2021. The UNICEF official said: "These people [have their daughters married] because they're
desperate for one reason or another: they're afraid of violence; they're afraid for the safety of the girls; they need resources; they can't afford to feed them." (Lizzy Davies, "Ethiopian drought leading to 'dramatic' increase in child marriage, Unicef warns," The Guardian, 30 April 2022)

CLIMATE CHANGE
ECOWAS agrees on new climate strategy
On 1 May, leaders from the Economic Community of West African States agreed on a regional strategy to deal with global warming over the next 10 years. In an agreement with EU, the ECOWAS plans on spending USD 294 billion in the next 10 years to tackle climate change. According to the ECOWAS commissioner for agriculture, environment and water resources, the strategy would help spread awareness about benefits of adopting new sustainable lifestyles to address global warming. The strategy aims to frame a regional policy compatible with the Paris Climate Agreement. ("West African countries agree on climate strategy," Africanews, 1 May 2022)

REGIONAL
Togo to mediate in Mali's political crisis
On 4 May, Mali and Togo's foreign ministers said Togo had agreed to mediate Mali's political crisis. Mali's foreign minister Abdoulaye Diop said Mali had approached Togo's "President Faure Gnassingbe to use his good office, wisdom and experience to facilitate dialogue with regional actors and more broadly dialogue with the entire international community." The request comes amid the international pressure on Mali's military government to establish a civilian rule. ("Togo agrees to mediate in Mali political crisis," Al Jazeera, 9 May 2022)

INTERNATIONAL
Reports link massacres in Africa to the Russian group
On 4 May, The Guardian reported that Russian mercenaries had been linked to massacres of civilians in different African countries. The Guardian reported that it had seen the Mali’s army's documents which said the presence of "Russian instructors" on "mixed missions" in Mali, was recorded in several operations carried out by Mali’s forces. The "Russian instructors" are speculated to be part of the Russian private military company, Wagner Group. Similarly, on 3 May, the Human Rights Watch released a report outlining the involvement of Russians in executing, torturing and beating civilians in the Central African Republic. The HRW report included witness accounts and linked the allegations to the Wagner Group. (Jason Burke and Emmanuel Akinwotu, "Russian mercenaries linked to civilian massacres in Mali," The Guardian, 4 May 2022; "Central African Republic: Abuses by Russia-Linked Forces," Human Rights Watch, 3 May 2022)

IMF warns about rising food and fuel prices in Africa
On 28 April, the International Monetary Fund warned about a possible "social unrest" in Africa due to increasing food and energy prices fuelled by the Ukraine war. The IMF, in its Regional Outlook for Africa, said: "The war in Ukraine has triggered a sharp increase in energy and food prices that could undermine food security in the region, raise poverty rates, worsen income inequality, and possibly lead to social unrest." The GDP growth in African countries was slightly higher in 2021 at 4.5 per cent, than the estimated 3.7 per cent. However, the IMF estimates that it is likely to fall to 3.8 per cent. Previously, on 8 April, the Food and Agricultural Organization said the food prices surged 12.6 per cent between February to March, recording the highest levels since 1990. ("IMF: Rising food and
UN Secretary-General visits African countries
On 1 May, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres arrived in Senegal as part of his first visit to Africa since the COVID-19 pandemic. Guterres met with Senegal’s president Macky Sall and discussed the continent’s socio-economic situation, need for vaccine equality and called for "a steady flow of food and energy in open markets, removing all unnecessary export restrictions." On 2 May, Guterres arrived in Niger wherein he met Niger's president Mohamed Bazoum. Guterres outlined the increasing terrorist attacks in West Africa; however, Guterres said such insecurity is part of "a multidimensional crisis of an extraordinary scale," highlighting "climate change, increased food insecurity, malnutrition and record high food prices." On 4 May, Guterres visited Nigeria and said the challenges in Nigeria's norther regions, including terrorism and the subsequent insecurity, need to be addressed. Guterres said the international community's support should reflect "not only a state of hope, but a state of reality, in which there is no room for terrorism." ("Guterres in Senegal: 'Triple crisis' in Africa aggravated by war in Ukraine," UN News, 1 May 2022; "In Niger, Guterres calls for more resources to fight terror attacks in Africa's Sahel," UN News, 2 May 2022; "Recognize 'enormous challenges' facing northern Nigeria to forge new hope, Guterres urges," UN News, 4 May 2022)

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About NIAS Africa Studies

As a part of the area studies initiatives, the Institute started a focussed study on Pakistan in 2020. In 2021, it expanded the area studies to include Europe Studies, China Reader, and Maritime Studies. In 2022, the Science, Technology and International Relations (STIR) programme at the Institute is further expanding its area studies, to include Africa.

The primary focus of NIAS Africa studies would be on the following five verticals: contemporary political issues, colonial legacies, problems of governance, civil-military equations, and the rise of radical Islamic groups. The primary objective is to study Africa from an internal prism.

NIAS Africa Studies would include a series of expert lectures, workshops, publications and a weekly exclusively focussed on Africa. The initiative also aims to create a network of young scholars studying Africa and also African scholars studying in various Indian institutions.

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