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CHAPTER 4

Niger's uranium as a cause for geopolitical struggle

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Abstract: This chapter analyses the geopolitical, historical and strategic significance of uranium extraction in Niger, a country that – despite its economic marginality – has played a disproportionately central role in energy and security frameworks. The study explores how uranium, a critical material for nuclear power and defence industries, has historically tied Niger to France through neocolonial economic structures, while also positioning it at the crossroads of contemporary global rivalries involving France, China and Russia. It argues that uranium has functioned not only as an export commodity but as a geopolitical lever – shaping Niger's internal politics, external alignments and economic sovereignty. Through a combination of historical analysis and political economy, the chapter examines the evolution of Niger's uranium sector from colonial extraction to its strategic reconfiguration following the 2023 military coup. The coup, and the subsequent expulsion of French interests, created space for new actors to enter the resource landscape, shifting the dynamics of foreign influence in the Sahel. Ultimately, the chapter contributes to broader debates on natural resources and regional power by highlighting the strategic centrality of uranium in shaping international alignments, resource governance and postcolonial state-building in West Africa.

Keywords: Niger, Uranium, Geopolitics, Neocolonialism, Sahel.

INTRODUCTION

The international struggle for control over natural resources continues to shape regional politics and global security. Among these, uranium – as

a critical input for nuclear energy and defence – is increasingly recognised as a strategic asset. While uranium production is often associated with industrialised states or large-volume producers such as Kazakhstan or Canada, Niger, a landlocked Sahelian state, has emerged as a pivotal actor in this geopolitical equation. Despite being one of the poorest countries globally, Niger's uranium reserves have long attracted foreign interest, particularly from France, and more recently from China and Russia. These entanglements exemplify how natural resources intersect with issues of economic sovereignty, security and neocolonialism – making uranium a useful lens through which to analyse regional power dynamics and global competition.

The central research question of this chapter is: "How has uranium shaped Niger's international position, internal politics and relationships with global powers across different historical and geopolitical phases"? The hypothesis proposed here is that uranium has functioned not simply as an economic resource, but as a strategic lever of influence, dependency and bargaining, especially in moments of political rupture such as the 2023 military coup. The chapter argues that while Niger has historically been subordinated in uranium-related partnerships, recent developments reflect an emerging pattern of resource-based agency – albeit one that risks reproducing extractive dynamics under new geopolitical umbrellas.

The analysis draws on several theoretical frameworks: first, from dependency theory, which helps to explain Niger's structural position in unequal global economic arrangements; second, from the political economy of resources, particularly concepts such as the "resource curse", resource sovereignty and the resource-security nexus; and third, from geopolitical neo-classical realism, which illuminates how global and regional actors instrumentalise resource access as part of strategic positioning.

Methodologically, the chapter adopts a qualitative approach grounded in case study analysis. It draws from a combination of historical institutional analysis, policy documents, reports by international organisations (e.g., the International Monetary Fund – IMF, European Commission) and secondary academic literature including political economy, African

studies and security studies. Archival data and investigative journalism sources have also been used where relevant to trace changes in contracts, political alignments and foreign investment patterns. Particular emphasis is placed on the events surrounding the 2023 coup and the role of actors such as Orano, Rosatom and China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) in shaping current developments.

The chapter is structured as follows. The first section outlines the strategic importance of uranium, emphasising its centrality to energy security and defence planning, particularly in France and the EU. The second section traces the historical and geopolitical trajectory of Niger's uranium sector, focusing on the colonial and postcolonial role of France, the marginalisation of local communities and Tuareg resistance. The third section analyses the contemporary geopolitical realignment that has followed the 2023 military coup, emphasising the growing role of alternative global powers and Niger's use of uranium as a bargaining tool.

This analysis seeks to contribute to the broader theme of the monograph – natural resources and regional power dynamics – by showing how resource-rich but institutionally weak states can simultaneously be objects and agents of geopolitical strategy. Niger, while small in output compared to other producers, exemplifies the asymmetric, strategic leverage that critical materials confer in the context of regional instability, international rivalry and the reconfiguration of postcolonial dependencies.

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF NIGER'S URANIUM

Uranium, as a cornerstone of civilian nuclear energy and a critical component in the defence industry, plays an increasingly strategic role in contemporary global affairs. Among the countries supplying this resource, Niger has emerged as one of the world's key producers. Despite its status as one of the poorest nations globally, Niger holds considerable geopolitical weight due to its uranium deposits, making it a focal point of

interest for global powers such as France, China and Russia (IMF, 2024). The control and management of this strategic resource have profound implications not only for regional security in West Africa but also for the broader dimensions of global energy security and industrial sovereignty, particularly within the European Union.

According to the World Nuclear Association (2024), Niger is the world's seventh-largest uranium producer. In 2022, it mined approximately 2,020 tonnes of uranium, accounting for about 4% of global production. These figures may appear modest in comparison to top producers such as Kazakhstan and Canada, yet they are highly significant due to the strategic dependencies they create. More importantly, uranium exports represent a critical share of Niger's economy and international relevance. Uranium is one of the country's top exports, accounting for approximately 43% of total exports in 2023 (World Integrated Trade Solutions). For France, which used to source roughly 20% of its nuclear fuel from Niger (Maad, 2023), the country is a key partner in ensuring the uninterrupted functioning of its 56 nuclear reactors, which provide over 70% of France's electricity supply. However, following the 2023 coup in Niger and the subsequent revocation of Orano's mining licenses by the military junta, France has faced significant challenges in maintaining its uranium supply, in response increasing imports from countries such as Kazakhstan, Namibia, Uzbekistan and Australia (Ross, 2024).

For Niger itself, uranium's value transcends economics. Among sub-Saharan African states, it is one of whose natural resources give it direct leverage in global strategic calculations. While many African economies depend on exports of agricultural goods or oil, Niger's uranium links it to nuclear energy markets and security frameworks. This gives the country a rare geopolitical currency – one that, if managed wisely, could strengthen its bargaining position and attract diversified partnerships.

The history of uranium mining in Niger is closely tied to French state interests. Since the 1970s, the French company Areva (now Orano) has operated major uranium mines in Arlit and Akokan. This relationship reflects broader post-colonial ties, where economic structures often

mirrored earlier forms of political dominance. However, the economic and political landscapes are no longer shaped solely by France. France's declining control over Niger's uranium sector is part of a broader erosion of its influence in West Africa, where the historic system of *Françafrique* – based on military ties, political loyalty and economic privileges – is increasingly contested by other actors. In countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, French troops have been expelled, and diplomatic alliances have shifted, exposing the limits of postcolonial dominance.

Over the past two decades, China has made significant inroads, notably through the CNNC, which has acquired licenses to exploit the Azelik mine through its subsidiary Somina. While Chinese operations have faced setbacks due to security concerns and local resistance, they represent a clear diversification of Niger's foreign partnerships and signal Beijing's long-term strategic interest in securing alternative uranium supplies (Cabestan, 2018, pp. 595–598). China continues to pursue long-term engagement framed as mutually beneficial development, leveraging infrastructure projects and diplomatic non-interference to secure footholds in key extractive sectors.

Russia has also emerged as a player in the broader uranium market, deepening its involvement in Niger, especially after 2022. Although it does not yet dominate Nigerien uranium projects directly, Rosatom's activities in neighbouring countries and its broader African strategy suggest a growing interest. Russia has capitalised (and had influences in creating) on the vacuum left by the French through a hybrid strategy combining military cooperation, political symbolism and covert influence. The Kremlin deploys actors such as the African Corps to offer security guarantees, while simultaneously opening doors for state-backed enterprises such as Rosatom to negotiate future access to resources. This approach, grounded in transactional alliances and anti-Western rhetoric, allows Moscow to position itself as a strategic partner without the historical baggage associated with former colonial powers. In my opinion, the Kremlin sees Niger's uranium as a means to both diversify supply sources and, first and foremost, forge strategic alliances in a rapidly developing new scramble for Africa.

After Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022, the vocal point of the EU's policy, was to reduce its energy dependency on Russia and develop energy sovereignty. Niger's uranium could offer an alternative that is both geographically and politically more aligned with European interests. Indeed, uranium has been officially designated a "critical raw material" by both the EU and the United States (European Commission, 2023; U.S. Department of Energy, 2022). This classification underscores the importance of securing access to this radioactive element not only for energy purposes but also for its role in national defence, including nuclear deterrence and propulsion systems. Uranium thus occupies a special place within what is known as the "resource-energy-security nexus".

The concept of the "resource nexus" emphasises the interdependence between natural resources (such as water, energy and minerals), environmental stability and security (Bleischwitz et al., 2017, pp. 4–8). Uranium is emblematic of this linkage. As a material essential for both civilian and military uses, its accessibility directly impacts energy security, technological development and strategic autonomy. In the case of Niger, this nexus is particularly evident. Security threats in the Sahel – including terrorism, military coups and foreign interventions – have a direct bearing on global energy markets due to the vulnerability of uranium supply chains. At the same time, global demand for clean energy (for example produced by nuclear power plants) and geopolitical rivalries drive international powers to increase their presence in uranium-rich regions. This dual dynamic makes Niger not just a supplier of a resource but a potential chokepoint in a complex system of geopolitical interdependencies.

HISTORICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL BACKGROUND

Niger's uranium industry is not only a central pillar of the country's economy but also a critical lens through which one can view the interlocking histories of colonialism, postcolonial dependence, geopolitical

competition and internal instability. The trajectory of uranium extraction in Niger reveals a complex story of foreign dominance, unbalanced development and contested sovereignty that continues to shape the country's politics and international role. The discovery of uranium in Niger in 1956 by French geologists laid the groundwork for what would become a long-term strategic relationship between France and its former colony. Following Niger's independence in 1960, France quickly secured access to uranium through defence agreements and institutional ties, preserving its ability to exploit resources critical to its national nuclear energy strategy (Tertrais, 2014, pp. 2–3). The logic of *Françafrique* – the informal network of influence Paris maintained across former colonies – manifested in the control over Niger's raw materials, particularly through the creation of bilateral structures and mining joint ventures that ensured French dominance. In the early 1970s, France oversaw the creation of two key companies: SOMAÏR (Société des Mines de l'Aïr) in 1968 and COMINAK (Compagnie Minière d'Akouta) in 1974, both operating in the uranium-rich Aïr region. These joint ventures, nominally involving Niger's state-owned company SOPAMIN, were dominated by French interests – especially Areva, in which the French state held most of the capital (Tertrais, 2014, p. 4). Infrastructure such as the "Uranium Highway" connecting Arlit to the Benin border was developed specifically to support the extraction and export of uranium to France. This neocolonial arrangement had long-term consequences. By 1982, uranium accounted for nearly 75% of Niger's export earnings and was the single most important revenue-generating activity (IMF, 2013, p. 18). While this created macroeconomic growth, most benefits bypassed the majority of Nigeriens, concentrating wealth in the capital and foreign boardrooms.

The unequal distribution of benefits from uranium extraction, especially its minimal impact on local development in the north, became a major driver of Tuareg resistance. The Tuareg, a nomadic population inhabiting the mining regions, were largely excluded from employment, infrastructure and decision-making. Their grievances sparked a series of uprisings beginning in the early 1990s, intensifying again in the 2000s.

The Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice (MNJ), active from 2007, demanded greater local control over natural resources and compensation for environmental damage and displacement. Rebel forces targeted mining infrastructure, kidnapped foreign workers and directly challenged the Nigerien state's alliance with foreign mining firms (van Walraven, 2019, pp. 3–4). In one striking episode, MNJ fighters abducted French employees of Areva near Arlit, humiliating the government and revealing the vulnerability of critical infrastructure (van Walraven, 2019, p. 4). The Nigerien government's approach was characterised by denial and repression. Civilian deaths, disappearances and torture were widely reported in Agadez and Iferouâne during the 2007–2009 uprising, with confirmations of arbitrary executions and the use of civilians to detonate landmines (van Walraven, 2019, p. 54). Rather than leading to reconciliation, the state's militarisation of the conflict entrenched mistrust among Tuareg communities, weakening long-term stability and alienating crucial actors in uranium-producing regions.

The dominance of foreign firms in Niger's uranium sector, especially Areva, has long been a source of political tension. In 2014, Niger sought to renegotiate its contract with Areva, demanding a fairer share of profits, increased local employment and higher taxes. These negotiations revealed the structural imbalance in power: Areva threatened to halt operations and invoked contractual protections, while Niger faced pressure to maintain investment flows (Tran, 2014). The IMF and World Bank further constrained Niger's fiscal space through structural adjustment programs throughout the 1990s and 2000s. These programmes promoted deregulation and prioritised foreign investment while pushing the Nigerien government to cut public spending and privatise services (IMF, 2013, pp. 20–21). By 2015, Areva had suspended development of the Imouraren mine amid falling global uranium prices, while labour unrest flared at Somaïr over unpaid bonuses (van Walraven, 2019, p. 95). These events illustrated both the vulnerability of the sector to external market forces and the limits of government leverage in shaping outcomes that favour national development. As a result, Niger remained

trapped in a paradox: rich in uranium, but unable to convert this into broad-based development or industrial capacity. Niger remained heavily dependent on aid and unable to invest in critical infrastructure or social programmes. Attempts to diversify partnerships – with China, for example – were seen as potential escapes from the French-dominated structure but often replicated the same extractive logics with different flags (Pharens, 2023).

The 2023 military coup in Niger marked a turning point in the whole international structure of Western Africa. After decades of close military and economic cooperation, the new Niger's junta, under Abdourahamane Tchiani, rapidly distanced itself from France, expelled French troops, and cancelled Orano's permit to develop the aforementioned Imouraren mine – one of the largest uranium deposits in the world (Pécout et al., 2024). In doing so, the junta framed its actions as part of a broader struggle for sovereignty and anti-colonial emancipation. This political upheaval has brought uncertainty into the uranium supply chain, raising concerns about energy security for nuclear-dependent nations. As Baba Freeman (2023) highlights, while Niger contributes about 4% to the global uranium supply, the coup's ramifications extend beyond immediate market disruptions, potentially affecting long-term investment and the stability of critical mineral supply chains essential for the energy transition.

As Raphale Pharens from the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) (2023) notes, the uranium crisis in Niger is part of a wider "perfect storm": political upheaval, jihadist insurgencies, climate stress and foreign rivalries converging on a fragile state. The vacuum left by France has opened space for new players, notably Russia, which is cultivating ties with Niger's junta and exploring investment opportunities in the resource sector. This geopolitical reconfiguration underscores how uranium is not only a mineral resource but also a lever of international alignment. As mentioned above, both the EU and the US have designated uranium a "critical raw material". This implies that they both hold interests in securing and accessing stable sources of extraction in, among other places, sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately for the West, this need could be jeopardised by

a new landscape of multipolar rivalry on the continent and growing African agency in itself fuelled by anti-western sentiment.

URANIUM AND CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY

Since the military coup of July 2023, a sharp recalibration of power has taken place in Niger. The disruption of France's dominance, alongside the emergence of Russia, China and other regional actors, has transformed the state into a stage of international competition. As a consequence, uranium has become not only an economic resource but a central tool of political leverage and geopolitical reconfiguration.

For decades, France maintained privileged access to Niger's uranium, primarily through the state-controlled firm Orano, which dominated extraction via joint ventures such as SOMAÏR and COMINAK. Uranium supplied from Niger has covered up to a fifth of France's nuclear fuel needs, providing strategic autonomy for Paris (Tertrais, 2014, p.4). However, the July 2023 military coup challenged this legacy. The new junta increasingly aligned itself with anti-French rhetoric and policy. In June 2024, the military authorities revoked Orano's license to develop the massive Imouraren deposit, citing a failure to begin extraction operations within agreed timeframes (Pécout et al., 2024). Orano later confirmed it had lost operational control of its assets in the country (Patton & Mallet, 2024). The coup significantly weakened French leverage not only economically but also diplomatically. As Grégoire (2011, p.8) noted, France's uranium dominance in Niger had been ensured by longstanding elite networks and postcolonial dependency. The recent upheaval of these networks reveals the fragility of neocolonial arrangements under new regional leadership.

The most alarming development in the region from a Western perspective is high activity of Russian federation in Western Africa. Moscow has moved swiftly to fill the vacuum left by Paris. Since 2023, Niger has developed closer ties with the Kremlin, including discussions to allow Russian

investment in uranium mining (Payne Institute, 2023). These overtures are part of a broader regional trend, with Mali and Burkina Faso similarly turning to Russia for military support and economic alternatives. The Wagner Group (and now it's successor – African Corps), Moscow's unofficial proxy in Africa, has reportedly established a presence in the region. While its precise role in Niger remains opaque, its footprint in neighbouring countries suggests that Russian influence may extend beyond diplomacy into the security of uranium installations (Pharens, 2023). For Moscow, access to uranium is not only an economic opportunity but a geopolitical tool in the broader confrontation with the West.

Other power that makes its interests in Niger visible is China. Beijing's interest in Niger is more economic than political. Its strategy, often framed as "infrastructure diplomacy", includes funding roads, pipelines and energy grids in exchange for access to natural resources. Although its presence in Niger's uranium sector is not yet as significant as in oil, Chinese companies have expressed interest in strategic minerals (Zidan, 2024).

Importantly, both China's and Russia's actions avoid the neocolonial associations that plague French policy. This provides Beijing and Moscow with soft power advantages. China's approach has been perceived as more respectful of national sovereignty, making its partnerships more palatable to post-coup authorities (Mia, 2025). A trend is also visible in neighbouring countries (Issaev et al., 2022, pp. 425–444).

The US maintains limited economic interests in Niger's uranium sector but is increasingly concerned about regional instability and Russian penetration. Washington's security cooperation with Niamey – particularly through drone operations against jihadist groups – was disrupted by the 2023 coup. US aid has since been partially suspended. Washington's policy has been historically focused on governance and human rights concerns. However, as it is in most African countries, these appeals often fail to gain traction in contexts where governments seek tangible security guarantees or economic benefits over normative rhetoric.

Neighbouring countries also have played an important role. Nigeria, as the dominant actor in Economic Community of West African States

(ECOWAS), has led the bloc's diplomatic response to the coup, including threats of intervention and economic sanctions. These measures, however, have had limited effect, as the junta has consolidated power and found alternative allies (Obasi, 2023). Algeria, which shares a long and porous border with Niger, has expressed concern over both jihadist spillover and the geopolitical vacuum created by France's departure. Given its own uranium reserves and strategic ambitions in the Sahara, Algeria could become a more active player in regional uranium politics.

Perhaps the most significant development since the 2023 coup is the transformation of uranium from almost exclusively French commodity into a bargaining chip. The junta has used it to attract new partners, demand the renegotiation of contracts and reject what it sees as unequal terms imposed by Western powers. As Nathalie Zidan (2024) points out, uranium has effectively become a "diplomatic currency" through which Niger negotiates its place in a rapidly changing world. This resource diplomacy has extended into Niger's relationships with the EU. As Europe seeks to diversify energy sources amid tensions with Russia, Nigerien uranium has become even more critical. The EU has expressed interest in resuming cooperation, but only under revised terms that acknowledge the changed political context (Mia, 2025).

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has demonstrated that uranium in Niger is far more than a mineral commodity – it is a strategic asset embedded in a complex web of historical legacies, global power competition and domestic political contestation. The analysis traced how France's longstanding control over Niger's uranium sector was rooted in colonial and neocolonial structures that shaped unequal economic arrangements, limited national sovereignty and exacerbated regional inequalities. Despite contributing significantly to France's nuclear energy security and Europe's broader strategic autonomy, uranium revenues have done little to alleviate poverty

or instability in Niger, particularly in its northern regions, which remain underdeveloped and conflict prone.

The 2023 military coup constituted a rupture in this longstanding pattern. By revoking Orano's license and expelling French military forces, the new Nigerien leadership reframed uranium as a tool of sovereignty and reoriented the country's external alignments toward Russia and China. While this suggests a degree of agency and a potential departure from France-dominated neocolonialism, it also raises critical concerns: will new actors replicate the same extractive logics under different geopolitical banners? Can Niger move beyond resource dependency towards a developmental model rooted in transparency, equity and local empowerment?

These questions point to several areas for further research. First, there is a need to analyse the long-term impact of Russia and China's involvement in Niger's uranium sector – not only in economic terms but in relation to environmental standards, labour conditions and political influence. Second, the evolving role of regional organisations, such as the Alliance of Sahel States and ECOWAS, deserves closer attention: could coordinated resource governance enhance regional bargaining power and reduce dependency? Finally, more research is needed on grassroots responses to these geopolitical shifts – particularly in uranium-producing communities, where disenfranchisement and environmental degradation remain acute.

By placing Niger's uranium within the broader framework of natural resources and regional power dynamics, this chapter contributes to the understanding of how strategic raw materials intersect with issues of economic sovereignty, geopolitical influence and postcolonial resistance. It shows that control over uranium has not only shaped Niger's external relations but also served as a catalyst for domestic instability and international realignment. The case of Niger reveals that resource control in fragile states is a geopolitical fault line – where global competition, national agency and regional instability collide.

Ultimately, the Nigerien case underscores a broader tension facing resource-rich but institutionally weak states: whether strategic minerals

will serve as levers of development and sovereignty – or remain vectors of dependency and elite capture. As global powers compete for access to critical materials like uranium, the challenge for Niger and its neighbours is not only to navigate multipolar rivalry but to redefine the terms of engagement in ways that serve their long-term interests.

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