

The Political Economy of Hegemonic Contestation and Military Coup D'état in the Niger Republic

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Abstract:

This study advances a theoretical account of the precise mechanism by which multipolar great-power patronage, particularly unconditional Russian security support and Chinese economic engagement, neutralizes the deterrent effect of normative regional sanctions, thereby lowering the perceived costs of unconstitutional power seizure in Francophone West Africa. The resurgence of military coups in the region between 2020 and 2024, most notably in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, represents a critical rupture in the region's postcolonial political architecture, coinciding with intensifying hegemonic rivalry between the traditional United States–France Atlantic alliance and an expanding Russia–China bloc. While existing literature extensively documents micro-level internal vulnerabilities, including institutional fragility, elite corruption, and failed democratic dividends, it leaves a significant empirical gap regarding how indirect hegemonic contestation over strategic geo-economic assets alters the strategic calculations of domestic military factions. Using the Niger Republic as the epicenter case, the study triangulates thematic analysis of 30 purposively selected elite interviews spanning diplomats, military scholars, policy analysts, and government, ECOWAS, and African Union officials against documentary evidence from ECOWAS, the African Union, the European Union, and junta communications. The study is theoretically anchored in an explicit three-tier nested framework integrating World-Systems Theory as the macro-structural container, Geoeconomic Theory as the mediating instrument, and classical realist Power Theory as the micro-level driver of military decision-making. Findings reveal that while internal micro-grievances, including weak civilian control over the military, elite capture, and chronic poverty amid resource wealth, precipitated the July 2023 coup, macro-level hegemonic contestation provided the necessary conditions for its consolidation and survival. The proposed Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline emerged as a critical sovereignty flashpoint and geo-economic bargaining chip within this dynamic. The study formalizes a five-mechanism model of proxy rivalry, including alternative security partnerships, resource-for-security deals, diplomatic cover, counter-sanctions, and institutional fragmentation, and characterizes these coups as a form of primitive accumulation by force, transitioning states from a Franco-centric extraction model toward multipolar patronage arrangements. The study recommends that ECOWAS and the African Union transition from blanket economic embargoes toward targeted sanctions against external paramilitary intermediaries and their local enablers, that Western powers pivot toward performance-based economic incentive frameworks, and that infrastructure agreements such as the Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline embed binding anti-coup and governance clauses.

Keywords: Hegemonic contestation, military coups, Niger Republic, geoeconomics, great-power competition, Russia–China bloc, Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline, Sahel.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Between 1950 and 2024, Africa, Asia, Europe, and Oceania recorded 511 coup attempts, roughly half of which were successful. Peaks in the mid-1960s, mid-1970s, and early 1990s reflected the intersection of internal institutional weakness and external Cold War-era geopolitical dynamics (Powell & Thyne, 2011). The collapse of the USSR and the emergence of a unipolar order catalyzed a decisive continental shift toward multi-party democracy through the early 2000s, formalized in instruments such as the 2000 Lomé Declaration and the ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. However, this democratic transition remained incomplete: persistent poverty, weak institutions, and elite legitimacy crises continued to fuel public disillusionment that military factions could later exploit (Ajah, 2020; Opalo, 2024).

The period 2014–2024 is analytically distinctive for combining a resurgence of internal vulnerabilities with a fundamental transformation of the international environment that exploited them. The coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) occurred amid an intensifying rivalry between the US–France-led Western Atlantic Alliance and an expanding Russia–China bloc, echoing Cold War-era superpower competition (Amoah, 2023). Russia's curtailed gas exports to Europe following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine intensified a strategic pivot toward African markets, where the Wagner Group and its successor, the Africa Corps, offered military regimes unconditional security support with minimal political conditionality, directly challenging the conditional aid and sanctions-based leverage traditionally wielded by Western powers (Bihina & Ayata, 2024; Miroiu & Alecu, 2024).

Translating this macro-structural rivalry into an explanation of any single coup, however, requires descending from aggregate coup statistics to the micro-decisional calculus of the specific actors who ultimately give the order to move: it is at the level of an individual presidential guard commander weighing the anticipated costs of isolation against the anticipated benefits of alternative patronage that hegemonic contestation is converted into a coup outcome. The Niger Republic constitutes the epicentre of this convergence. Endowed with substantial uranium reserves supplying roughly a quarter of France's nuclear fuel needs and positioned centrally within the Sahel, Niger has been a site of pronounced hegemonic contestation: France maintained post-colonial influence, the United States established military installations, and Russia and China competed for access and allegiance.

The July 2023 coup, in which the presidential guard, under General Abdourahamane Tchiani, detained President Mohamed Bazoum, can be read as a reconfiguration of hegemonic alignments as much as a rupture of constitutional order, replacing elites closely aligned with French interests with a coalition seeking alternative hegemonic partnerships. Central to this reconfiguration is the proposed Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline (NMGP), a projected 5,600–6,900-kilometre, approximately \$25 billion infrastructure corridor intended to diversify European gas supply away from

Russian dependence, rendering it, in the assessment of this study's respondents, inherently anti-Russian and consequently a strategic target for disruption.

While existing literature extensively documents the internal governance deficits and, separately, the external geopolitical influences shaping West African coups (Usman & Obi, 2024; Odigbo et al., 2023; Onapajo & Babalola, 2024; Akinola & Makombe, 2024), it has not systematically interrogated how hegemonic rivalry between the US–France and Russia–China blocs alters the incentive structures of military factions and lowers the perceived costs of unconstitutional power seizures at the micro-decisional level. This gap carries direct policy significance: ECOWAS and the African Union continue to apply conditional aid and sanctions on the assumption that domestic pressure alone can restore constitutional order, even as Russian and Chinese alternative patronage networks fundamentally alter junta calculations.

This study therefore investigates the political economy of great-power competition and its influence on military coups in Niger, guided by four core analytical research questions oriented toward causal pathways rather than descriptive coverage:

RQ1: Through what structural channels do domestic governance vulnerabilities interact with external geopolitical pressure to shape political (in)stability?

RQ2: Through what causal channels do US–France and Russia–China bloc strategic rivalry alter the incentive structures underlying military coup attempts?

RQ3: Through what operational mechanisms does the Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline function as a geo-economic variable mediating great-power competition's effect on coup vulnerability?

RQ4: Through what precise structural channels does alternative external patronage alter the expected utility of military plotters during sanctions-regime enforcement, and how does this facilitate unconstitutional power seizures?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A THREE-TIER NESTED MODEL

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical traditions. World-Systems Theory, Geoeconomic Theory, and classical realist Power Theory. Because these traditions operate at different levels of abstraction and carry different assumptions about structure and agency, they are not treated as parallel, freestanding lenses applied side by side. Doing so would risk unresolved epistemological friction: World-Systems Theory is macro-structural and deterministic, while classical realism is state-centric and agency-driven. Instead, the three traditions are organised into an explicit analytical hierarchy, nested from the most structural to the most proximate level of explanation, so that each theory answers a distinct and non-competing question about the same causal chain.

2.1 World-Systems Theory: The Macro-Structural Container

At the outermost, structural level, World-Systems Theory (Wallerstein, 1974) situates Niger within a global capitalist hierarchy stratified into core, semi-periphery, and periphery, in which peripheral states are structurally locked into producing low-wage raw-material exports for Niger, principally uranium, systematically extracted by core states such as France and the United States. Read through this lens, the July 2023 coup is not an anomalous political aberration but a predictable manifestation of systemic strain, in which elite factions attempt to renegotiate the terms of exploitation amid hegemonic transition; the junta's expulsion of French forces and reorientation toward Russian mercenary support exemplifies a peripheral state leveraging inter-hegemonic rivalry to extract, in Wallerstein's terms, flexibility within the core-periphery relationship, even without fundamentally altering Niger's structurally exploited position. World-Systems Theory therefore supplies the outer boundary condition of the analysis: it explains why a hegemonic contest over Niger exists at all, without on its own specifying how that contest is operationalised or why any particular actor chooses to act.

2.2 Geoeconomic Theory: The Mediating Instrument

At the intermediate level, Geoeconomic Theory extends the analysis to the deliberate use of economic instruments infrastructure projects, resource concessions, and trade dependencies as tools of statecraft. Within the nested framework, Geoeconomic Theory functions as the mediating instrument through which the macro-structural contest identified by World-Systems Theory is translated into concrete, contestable assets. Applied to this study, it conceptualises the NMGP not merely as a commercial energy project but as a securitised strategic asset whose control functions as a sovereignty flashpoint and bargaining chip: for Western powers, a vehicle for diversifying Europe away from Russian gas; for Russia, a direct threat requiring disruption. This framework explains why juntas in resource-rich, infrastructure-adjacent states can leverage geoeconomic assets as coup-proofing instruments, extracting concessions from both blocs simultaneously, the operational channel through which the world-system's core-periphery contest becomes locally actionable.

2.3 Classical Realism and Praetorianism: The Micro-Level Driver

At the innermost, most proximate level, classical realist Power Theory, developed most influentially by Morgenthau (1948) from the earlier insights of Thucydides and Machiavelli, holds that power, encompassing military, economic, diplomatic, and cultural dimensions, is the primary driver of state and factional behaviour in an anarchic international system lacking any overarching enforcement authority. Its core tenets the centrality of power, state- and actor-centrism, self-help, balance-of-power dynamics, a preoccupation with relative rather than absolute gains, and the security dilemma provide the framework for understanding the final, decisive step in the causal chain: the

individual military actor's decision calculus. Combined with the concept of praetorianism, this level explains why competing external support lowers the perceived risk of coup attempts for a specific actor, such as General Tchiani's presidential guard; the availability of great-power backing, whether Western recognition or Russian security guarantees, emboldens military factions by promising insulation from the consequences of unconstitutional seizure.

2.4 Theoretical Synthesis: Explicit Hierarchy

The three traditions are therefore harmonised into a single nested causal chain rather than listed as competing paradigms:

World-Systems Theory (macro-structural container: why the contest over Niger exists) → Geoeconomic Theory (mediating instrument: how the contest is operationalised through the NMGP and uranium assets) → Classical Realism / Praetorianism (micro-level driver: why a specific military actor chooses to act).

This hierarchy resolves the epistemological tension between macro-determinism and agency: World-Systems Theory explains the structural stakes, Geoeconomic Theory explains the contestable instrument, and Power Theory/practorianism explains the proximate decision. The study acknowledges World-Systems Theory's tendency toward macro-determinism, which can obscure domestic political agency, and accordingly treats it strictly as the outer explanatory layer, with the finer-grained, agency-sensitive insights of Geoeconomic Theory and Power Theory reserved for analysing the coup's proximate mechanisms in Sections 5 and 6.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature is organised around three unresolved theoretical and empirical debate axes that structure the field and that this study is positioned to adjudicate empirically.

3.1 Endogenous Praetorianism versus Exogenous Systemic Shock

One axis of debate concerns whether West African coups are best explained by internal institutional failure or by external geopolitical disruption. On the endogenous side, Usman and Obi (2023, 2024) and Odigbo et al. (2023) identify weak civil-military relations and institutional fragility as recurrent preconditions, while Campion and Jega (2023) and Onapajo and Babalola (2024) examine the limitations of ECOWAS's normative anti-coup architecture. All treat the coup as fundamentally a domestic governance failure.

On the exogenous side, Akinola and Makombe (2024) and Kohnert (2022) analyze Russia's strategic pivot toward Africa following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine; Bihina and Ayata (2024) and Miroiu and Alecu (2024) document the operational transition from the Wagner Group to the state-integrated Africa Corps; and Marten's (2022) RAND Corporation case study of Wagner operations in Libya and the Central African Republic empirically demonstrates a 'resources-for-security' model in which security services are exchanged for mining concessions. Comparative regional scholarship, including Kamrava's (2018) analysis of multipolar involvement in the Middle East, Paraschos's (2017) 'shatter belt' framework, and Iqbal and Afridi's (2017) study of the 'New Great Game' in Central Asia, reinforces the generalizability of exogenous-shock accounts by showing that multipolar external involvement increases fragile-state instability elsewhere. Adeoye (2024) and the International Crisis Group (2023) occupy a middle position, finding that foreign military actors and endogenous military grievances interact rather than operating as rival, mutually exclusive explanations, position this study's evidence ultimately supports.

3.2 Normative Democracy Assistance versus Transactional Security Patronage

A second axis concerns the comparative effectiveness of two competing external engagement models. Williams (2024) evaluates the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and finds its implementation inconsistent across member states due to variable political will. Campion and Jega (2023) similarly document the normative limits of ECOWAS anti-coup enforcement, together representing the normative democracy-assistance model and its documented shortcomings. Against this, Marten's (2022) resources-for-security account and the Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Research Lab's (2023) documentation of coordinated Russian disinformation campaigns in Francophone Africa, which find that anti-French narratives spiked conspicuously around the Niger coup and created a permissive environment for military takeover by eroding elected governments' legitimacy, together characterize the transactional security-patronage model as materially and narratively more responsive to junta incentives than conditional Western assistance.

3.3 Infrastructure as Development Driver versus Infrastructure as Sovereignty Flashpoint

A third axis concerns how transnational infrastructure is theorized. Gregoire (2023) situates coups in Francophone Africa within the historical architecture of Franco-African cooperation agreements that ceded resource access and military basing rights to France, treating infrastructure and resource arrangements primarily as development and cooperation instruments. By contrast, Bach (2019) highlights the material stakes of uranium revenues, basing rights, and development assistance underlying hegemonic

competition in Niger. Against this developmental framing, Goldthau and Sitter's (2022) policy analysis of the European Union's REPowerEU strategy finds that the urgent post-Ukraine need to diversify away from Russian gas transformed African gas producers into strategic imperatives, elevating projects such as the NMGP from commercial ventures to geo-economic assets. This provides direct empirical grounding for this study's characterization of the NMGP as a sovereignty flashpoint rather than a neutral development project. Familugba et al. (2024), applying Resource Curse Theory directly to the Niger case, occupy an intermediate position, finding that the coup has strained Nigeria–Niger security cooperation and created cross-border risk, without settling whether infrastructure functions primarily as a development driver or a flashpoint.

3.4 Synthesis: The Integration Gap

Despite this rich and multifaceted body of scholarship across all three axes, a critical integration gap remains: the absence of an analysis that systematically links the macro-structural dynamics of renewed US–Russia hegemonic contestation to the micro-political calculations of Nigerien military elites that produced the July 2023 coup. Existing studies thoroughly catalogue internal drivers, such as weak institutions, corruption, and jihadist insecurity, but tend to treat external geopolitical factors as contextual background rather than direct causal triggers (endogenous/exogenous axis).

The expanding literature on great-power competition documents Russia's resources-for-security model and Western energy diversification but rarely addresses how these external rivalries are operationalized at the level of presidential-guard decision-making (normative/transactional axis). Moreover, while world-systems and dependency scholarship explain Niger's persistent underdevelopment as a peripheral uranium exporter, this framework has not been operationalized to explain how contemporary US–Russia rivalry alters elite military calculus (infrastructure axis). A further methodological gap persists: most existing studies rely on post hoc open-source intelligence and retrospective interviews susceptible to justification bias by coup leaders themselves, whereas this study's triangulation of thirty elite informants across seven independent institutional categories, cross-validated against contemporaneous documentary sources, offers a comparatively rigorous corrective. This study addresses the integration gap directly by applying the three-tier nested theoretical framework established in Section 2 to adjudicate empirically across all three debate axes simultaneously.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

4.1 Research Design and Case Selection

The study adopted an exploratory, explanatory, and case-study research design, chosen for its capacity to investigate the 'why' and 'how' questions surrounding an emergent and under-theorised phenomenon, geo-economic contestation, while providing the bounded

system needed to observe how global hegemonic pressures manifest locally (Baudais, 2024; Zida et al., 2017). The Niger Republic was purposively selected as the case given its July 2023 coup, positioning it at the forefront of Franco-American/Russia-China contestation in West Africa, alongside its substantial uranium reserves, central Sahelian location, and evolving geopolitical realignment.

4.2 Sampling Procedure and Data Collection

The accessible population comprised 148 stakeholders drawn from Nigerien government ministries, the ECOWAS Commission, the African Union Commission, the Nigerien armed forces, embassies of France, the United States, Russia, China, Nigeria, Chad, and Morocco, universities, and policy think tanks (ISS Africa, SIPRI, Chatham House, the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, and the Centre for Democracy and Development). From this population, 30 key informants were selected through purposive expert sampling complemented by criterion and snowball techniques, following a five-stage protocol: sampling-frame development, criterion-based screening (requiring senior/decision-making positions, at least five years' relevant professional experience, and direct involvement in Niger/Sahel/ECOWAS/Russia–China affairs), purposive selection ensuring institutional representation, snowball referral for hard-to-reach military and diplomatic informants, and interviewing to the point of data saturation, reached at 30 participants (consistent with Guest et al.'s 2006 saturation benchmarks for purposive elite samples).

Table 1 summarises the final interview sample.

Participant Category	Institution	n
Senior government officials	Niger ministries (Foreign Affairs, Defence, Finance, Interior, Petroleum)	5
ECOWAS officials	ECOWAS Commission (Political Affairs, Peace & Security)	4
African Union officials	AU Commission (Peace and Security Department)	3
Senior military officers	Niger Armed Forces (retired/serving, where ethically permissible)	5
Embassy officials	France, US, Russia, China, Nigeria, Chad, Morocco (Abuja/Niamey)	5

Participant Category	Institution	n
Academic experts	Universities specialising in IR, security studies, political economy	4
Policy think tanks	ISS Africa, SIPRI, NIIA, Centre for Democracy and Development	4
Total		30

Source: Researcher-constructed sampling framework, 2026.

4.3 Ethical Considerations and Data Integrity

All participants gave informed consent, written where in-person contact was feasible, and recorded verbal consent, witnessed and logged, where interviews were conducted remotely via encrypted channels, after being briefed on the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, and the limits of confidentiality in a politically sensitive research environment. Interviews were conducted through a mixed-media protocol calibrated to each respondent's security context: in-person interviews were held, where access permitted, in Niamey and Abuja; where direct access was restricted by security or diplomatic protocol, interviews were conducted via end-to-end encrypted voice or video channels. All interview recordings and transcripts were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices with access restricted to the research team, and raw identifying data were destroyed following anonymisation and completion of analysis, consistent with the institution's data retention policy.

Verbatim extracts were anonymised using participant codes (PE for Political Economist, HMS for High-Ranking Military Scholar, D for Diplomat, TA for Think-Tank Analyst, SA for Security Analyst, P for Parliamentarian, J for Journalist), with no participant's institutional affiliation, nationality, or identifying biographical detail reported in combination sufficient to permit re-identification. Data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analytic narrative organised around seven sections corresponding to the study's research questions. Coding was conducted using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo), with a subsample of transcripts independently double-coded to assess coding consistency; discrepancies were resolved through discussion and codebook refinement rather than a single fixed reliability statistic, consistent with reflexive (as opposed to strictly positivist) thematic analysis. Validity and reliability were further established through methodological triangulation across seven structurally distinct institutional categories, minimising single-source bias in a politically sensitive research environment where official access is often restricted.

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Internal and External Drivers of the July 2023 Coup

Analysis of interview data reveals the July 2023 coup as the culmination of entrenched internal political fractures and external pressures rather than a spontaneous event. Participants consistently identified weak civilian control over the military as the most significant internal factor, rooted in Niger's post-independence history of recurrent intervention (1974, 1996, 1999, 2010, and an attempted coup in 2021). One high-ranking military scholar (HMS2) described the Nigerien military as never having 'fully internalised the principle of civilian supremacy,' operating instead with a praetorian mindset activated whenever civilian leaders were perceived as corrupt or overly aligned with foreign interests. President Bazoum's reported plan to sideline General Tchiani as head of the presidential guard was widely identified as the immediate trigger, consistent with coup literature emphasising that leaders' attempts to remove powerful security commanders often precipitate seizures of power (Harkness, 2016).

Economic grievances provided supporting legitimisation. Despite uranium accounting for approximately 70 per cent of export revenues, extreme poverty afflicts over 80 per cent of Niger's population, with youth unemployment exceeding 50 per cent in urban areas a pattern one political economist (PE4) described as 'a textbook case of the resource curse,' with uranium revenues historically flowing to French nuclear firm Orano and a small Niamey elite. At the same time, rural and Tuareg communities saw little benefit. Externally, France's visible military footprint became, in one diplomat's (D5) words, 'a lightning rod,' with ordinary Nigeriens perceiving French forces as failing to prevent jihadist attacks while continuing to secure uranium for French nuclear plants a narrative amplified by documented Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Francophone Africa.

5.2 Great-Power Investment and Strategic Realignment

Table 2 presents estimated directional patterns in US and Russian economic engagement with West Africa across the 2020–2024 period, illustrating the trajectory underlying respondents' accounts of strategic realignment: as US-linked investment activity was perceived to decline from a 2020 baseline toward 2024, Russian-linked investment activity was perceived to more than triple over the same period, with 2022–2023 marking the signing of uranium and gold concession deals and Russian backing for post-coup junta consolidation.

Year	US-Linked Engagement (US\$ million, est.)	Russia-Linked Engagement (US\$ million, est.)	Notes
2020	1,000	200	Baseline: US dominant, Russia low
2021	950	300	Russia expands Wagner presence
2022	900	450	Uranium, gold deals signed
2023	850	600	Russia backs juntas, sanctions relief
2024	800	700	US aid drops, Russia overtakes in mining

Note: Figures represent a qualitative consensus synthesis derived from respondent interviews (embassy officials, policy think-tank analysts, political economists), cross-referenced against publicly reported global FDI trend data (Visual Capitalist, 2024). They are directional, order-of-magnitude estimates of relative strategic engagement, not official bilateral investment accounting figures reported by the US or Russian governments, and should not be cited as precise financial data.

This investment realignment was mirrored in resource and infrastructure interests. Table 3 summarises the principal contested assets identified by respondents across the region, showing a consistent pattern in which Russian interest concentrates on direct security partnerships tied to resource access (uranium, gold), while US and French interest operates indirectly through existing NATO-aligned supply chains and major Western energy firms, with Morocco's Trans-Saharan pipeline ambitions positioned to undermine Russian gas leverage in Europe directly.

Country	Resource/Project	US/Western Interest	Russian Interest
Niger	Uranium mining	Indirect; supports France/NATO supply	Direct partnerships with juntas
Mali	Gold and mining security	Limited direct involvement	Africa Corps protection for mining sites
Nigeria	Oil and gas pipelines	Major US firms (ExxonMobil, Chevron)	Limited oil deals, opposes US-NATO presence
Morocco	Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline	Aligned with US-led diversification strategy	Undermines Russian gas leverage in EU

Note: Entries represent a qualitative synthesis of respondent-identified resource and infrastructure interests, triangulated against IMF (2023) balance-of-payments data. Figures are illustrative of directional strategic interest rather than exact investment accounting, and no entry should be read as an official government-reported figure.

5.3 The Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline as a Geo-Economic Flashpoint

Participants unanimously described the NMGP as a 'geopolitical chess piece' rather than a purely commercial undertaking. One political economist (PE1) explained that the pipeline's very conception diversifying Europe away from Russian gas is 'anti-Russian, which is why Moscow watches it with great alarm.' For Niger specifically, as a landlocked prospective transit state, the pipeline offered a potential revenue stream of transit fees reaching an estimated hundreds of millions of dollars annually, while simultaneously making the country a target of competing external pressures. A high-ranking military scholar (HMS3) observed that the junta 'can play them off against each other' publicly signalling continued NMGP engagement to the West while simultaneously exploring the Algerian-led, Russian-aligned Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline as an alternative, using the rivalry itself as a coup-proofing instrument.

5.4 Validation of Research Questions and the Formalised Five-Mechanism Model

All four of the study's research questions were substantively addressed by the weight of qualitative evidence, as summarised in Table 4.

RQ	Core Claim	Evidentiary Status
RQ1	Weak governance structures increase vulnerability to political instability under external geopolitical pressure	Supported
RQ2	US–France and Russia–China bloc interventions significantly alter coup incentive structures in Sahelian states	Supported
RQ3	The NMGP, as a strategic economic variable, mediates great-power competition's effect on coup vulnerability	Supported
RQ4	Strategic realignment toward Russian security engagement heightens instability and facilitates power seizures	Supported

Source: Thematic analysis of elite interview data, 2026.

Participants converged on a causal account explaining how proxy rivalry translates into coup enablement. Rather than presenting this account as narrative alone, it is formalised below as an explicit five-mechanism model, with each mechanism specified by its operational channel, its impact on domestic military decision-making, and its supporting empirical evidence (Table 5).

Mechanism	Operational Channel	Domestic Military Impact	Empirical Evidence
1. Alternative security partnerships	Conditional Western vs. unconditional Russian security guarantees	Removes fear of isolation as a constraint on coup planning	P2: “great power competition provides the oxygen... With Russia offering a safety net, the calculus changes”
2. Resource-for-security deals	Mining/uranium concessions exchanged for regime protection (Wagner/Africa Corps model)	Provides material payoff securing loyalty of security forces	Marten (2022); gold exports to UAE-linked networks increased post-coup (Section 5.6)
3. Diplomatic cover and narrative warfare	Russian UN vetoes/supportive resolutions; coordinated disinformation	Reduces reputational and legitimacy cost of unconstitutional seizure	D5 corroborating Atlantic Council DFRL (2023) disinformation findings
4. Counter-sanctions	Junta weaponises Russian/Chinese alternative trade to blunt ECOWAS/Western sanctions.	Neutralises the deterrent effect of economic isolation	TA1: ECOWAS sanctions “push the regime further toward Russia...”
5. Institutional fragmentation	Formation of the Alliance of Sahel States as a parallel regional bloc	Provides an exit option from ECOWAS normative pressure	P4: AES as “a coup-protection pact”

Source: Thematic synthesis of elite interview and documentary evidence, 2026.

As one parliamentarian (P2) summarised the model's cumulative logic, 'great power competition provides the oxygen. Without alternative patrons, coup plotters would face isolation. With Russia offering a safety net, the calculus changes.'

5.5 Interview Validation Across Respondent Categories

A distinguishing strength of this study's design is the cross-institutional triangulation of its findings: the same causal narrative internal grievance interacting with external patronage to enable coup consolidation was independently corroborated across seven structurally distinct respondent categories with divergent institutional interests, substantially reducing the risk that findings reflect a single source's bias. Military respondents validated the internal-legitimacy dimension: a high-ranking military scholar (HMS2) described the presidential guard's action as rooted in an institutional 'praetorian mindset.' At the same time, a second (HMS4) independently assessed that "Wagner's record in Mali is mixed at best... In Niger, the pattern is repeating: short-term regime stabilisation, long-term instability" a security-outcomes judgement echoed by a security analyst (SA3), who reported jihadist violence rising by over 40 per cent within months of the coup as the junta redeployed forces toward capital-city power consolidation rather than rural counter-insurgency.

Diplomatic respondents validated the external-patronage dimension from an institutional-relations perspective distinct from the military account: a diplomat who served in Niamey (D3) linked General Tchiani's reported impending dismissal directly to coup timing, while a second diplomat (D4) described the junta's simultaneous signalling to both blocs: 'they tell France and the US: restore our uranium revenue terms... They tell Russia: support our junta, and we will favour the TSGP over the NMGP' independently corroborating the geo-economic bargaining-chip mechanism identified by political economist respondents (PE1, PE2). Think-tank and parliamentary respondents converged on the institutional-fragmentation finding: a think-tank analyst (TA1) observed that ECOWAS sanctions 'push the regime further toward Russia... The junta successfully framed ECOWAS as a tool of French neo-colonialism, gaining domestic legitimacy,' while a parliamentarian (P4) independently characterised the AES as 'a coup-protection pact.' This convergence of independent institutional perspectives on a common causal account, rather than reliance on any single respondent category, is what allows the study's findings in Table 4 to be treated as robust rather than as artefacts of a particular informant group's institutional position.

5.6 Political Economy of the Coup: Resource Realignment and Accumulation

Reading the interview and documentary evidence through a political economy lens reveals that the July 2023 coup functioned simultaneously as a political rupture and an economic restructuring event. Respondents consistently linked regime survival to control over material resources rather than to political ideology alone. A political economist (PE4) characterised Niger as 'a textbook case of the resource curse,' in which uranium revenues, approximately 70 per cent of export earnings historically flowed to French firm Orano and a small Niamey elite while producing regions saw negligible benefit; this material grievance provided the coup's popular legitimating narrative even though it was not, on the evidence, its proximate military trigger.

After the coup, the junta's engagement with Russian intermediaries followed a discernible resource-for-security logic: gold exports to UAE-based, Russian-linked transshipment networks increased sharply, while the regime simultaneously kept the NMGP negotiation formally open as leverage against both blocs and explored the Algerian-led, Russian-aligned Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline as an alternative transit corridor. This pattern of expropriating French-aligned economic assets (revoking mining permits, opening sovereign-currency discussions) and redistributing access to new patrons constitutes what this study characterises as primitive accumulation by force: coercive state power used to reallocate the terms of resource extraction rather than to abolish extraction itself. The political economy implication is that the coup did not remove Niger from a position of resource dependency within the global economic hierarchy but renegotiated who captures the rents of that dependency, with material resource control functioning as both the coup's underlying cause and its consolidating mechanism.

5.7 Policy Implications

These findings carry direct and substantial policy implications. Most fundamentally, the continued reliance of ECOWAS, the African Union, and Western bilateral partners on conditional aid and blanket sanctions presupposes a unipolar international order that, on the evidence presented, no longer exists in the Sahel. Deterrence frameworks calibrated to a world in which isolation from the West meant isolation, full stop, are structurally obsolete in a context where Russian and Chinese alternative patronage removes that isolation as a credible threat meaning that continuing to apply these instruments unmodified will not merely fail to prevent future coups but will actively cede strategic influence to competing powers while leaving Nigerien and Sahelian civilian populations bearing the humanitarian cost of sanctions that do not constrain the juntas they target. A second policy implication concerns infrastructure governance: because the evidence shows the NMGP functioned as an active contributing variable in coup dynamics rather than a passive casualty of instability, project sponsors and transit-state governments must treat large transnational infrastructure agreements as sites requiring explicit political and governance safeguards from inception, not retrofitted protections applied after instability has already occurred.

A third implication concerns the sequencing of security and governance assistance: because military elites perceived Western conditionality as a source of resentment rather than reform incentive, future engagement models require milestone structures that reward incremental, verifiable progress rather than demanding wholesale democratic transformation as a precondition for any support. Collectively, these implications point toward a single overarching policy requirement: understanding and addressing West Africa's coup resurgence requires an analytical and policy lens that is simultaneously historical, geopolitical, and material one that treats local governance failure, global

hegemonic realignment, and strategic infrastructure as structurally intertwined rather than as separable policy domains.

6. DISCUSSION

These findings extend the political economy literature on West African coups in three principal ways. First, they provide micro-level evidence for a relationship the existing literature has largely theorised at the macro-structural level: that great-power competition does not merely correlate with coup resurgence but actively lowers the perceived costs of unconstitutional power seizure through the identifiable mechanisms formalised in Table 5. This corroborates and extends Akinola and Makombe's (2024) and Kohnert's (2022) analyses of Russian strategic engagement by tracing its direct influence on Nigerien military decision-making in the months preceding the July 2023 coup, evidence that the existing literature had not previously documented.

Second, the study's treatment of the NMGP as an active causal variable, rather than merely a passive casualty of instability, reframes infrastructure geopolitics in fragile states, adjudicating the third literature-review debate axis (Section 3.3) in favour of the sovereignty-flashpoint interpretation. Where prior scholarship analyses energy infrastructure through technical or economic lenses, this study's evidence indicates that the pipeline functioned simultaneously as a sovereignty flashpoint, a bargaining chip, and a catalyst for external competition, directly contributing to the political vulnerability of the Bazoum government by framing its Western-oriented energy alignment as a betrayal exploitable by coup plotters. This finding has a structural parallel in Geoeconomic Theory's account of infrastructure securitisation (Section 2.2). It suggests that major transnational infrastructure projects in politically fragile transit states should be treated by planners not as politically neutral commercial ventures but as potential objects of contestation requiring explicit political safeguards.

Third, the evidence that Western conditional aid generated resentment among military elites perceived, in one diplomat's words, as a demand that 'the more France and the US demanded reforms, the more the military elite saw them as threats' while Russian unconditional support removed a critical constraint on coup planning, offers an empirically grounded account of why traditional Western and ECOWAS deterrence frameworks have become increasingly ineffective, adjudicating the second literature-review debate axis (Section 3.2) in favour of the transactional-patronage model's comparative effectiveness. This is not, the evidence suggests, primarily because these frameworks are poorly designed, but because the geopolitical context in which they operate has fundamentally shifted: coup plotters no longer face the binary choice between compliance and total isolation that underpinned earlier deterrence logic. Read through World-Systems Theory (Section 2.1), this represents Niger's peripheral position adapting tactically to hegemonic transition rather than escaping structural exploitation; the shift from French to Russian patronage does not, on the evidence presented, alter Niger's

fundamental position as a resource-exporting periphery, even as it demonstrably alters the domestic political calculus around constitutional governance.

These findings support characterising the 2014–2024 coup wave as a form of primitive accumulation by force: military regimes using state power to expropriate French economic assets, revoking mining permits, initiating sovereign currency discussions, and redistributing them to new patrons, with control over uranium, gold, and prospective gas revenues determining geopolitical alignment more than declared political principle. This reframes the coups as fundamentally economic restructuring events wearing political clothing, a perspective with direct implications for how regional and international responses should be designed, and resolves the first literature-review debate axis (Section 3.1) by showing that endogenous praetorianism and exogenous systemic shock are not competing explanations but sequential stages within a single causal chain: internal grievance provides the trigger, external patronage provides the means of consolidation.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following five recommendations are each tied to a specific implementing body, a concrete mechanism, and the finding from which it derives, to ensure actionability rather than general exhortation.

7.1 Targeted sanctions against Russian intermediary networks

Responsible bodies: ECOWAS Commission, African Union Peace and Security Council, member-state financial intelligence units.

Action: Establish a joint ECOWAS–AU monitoring unit to track gold, uranium, and other resource exports from coup-affected states to known Russian transshipment conduits (e.g., UAE, Central African Republic, Sudan); impose secondary sanctions on financial institutions knowingly facilitating resource-for-security deals with the Africa Corps; and maintain an enforceable, cross-jurisdictional designated-persons list of Russian PMC operatives and their local proxies, with asset freezes and travel bans. A transparent humanitarian exemption mechanism must accompany these measures to avoid the civilian harm that discredited prior blanket sanctions. Rationale: this responds directly to the finding (Section 5.6; Table 5, Mechanism 2) that blanket sanctions failed because Russia supplied alternative economic lifelines, while gold exports through Russian-linked conduits increased sharply post-coup.

7.2 A performance-based 'earn-back' incentive framework

Responsible bodies: US Department of State, USAID, European External Action Service, EU Delegations in West Africa.

Action: Replace ex ante aid conditionality with locally negotiated, measurable milestones: reduction in verified civilian casualties, passage and implementation of anti-corruption legislation, and professionalised and depoliticised military promotion systems, each triggering pre-announced aid disbursement within a fixed 30-day window upon verification. Include a temporary 'suspension for cause' clause, automatically reinstated upon remediation, to prevent moral hazard without reintroducing indefinite conditionality. *Rationale:* this directly counters the finding that Russian speed and absence of conditions gave it a decisive competitive advantage over Western assistance in shaping junta calculations (Sections 5.1–5.2; Table 5, Mechanism 1).

7.3 Binding governance and anti-coup clauses in NMGP agreements

Responsible bodies: Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC), Moroccan National Office of Hydrocarbons and Mines (ONHYM), ECOWAS Energy Protocol Secretariat.

Action: Embed a 'democratic continuity' clause suspending transit-fee payments and infrastructure benefits immediately upon any unconstitutional change of government in a transit state, resumed only after internationally verified restoration of constitutional order; an 'anti-patronage' clause barring host governments from granting resource concessions to sanctioned entities along the pipeline corridor; and a transparency requirement depositing all pipeline-related revenues into independently audited, civil-society-monitored sovereign wealth accounts, adjudicated through an ECOWAS Energy Protocol dispute-resolution mechanism.

Rationale: this responds to the finding that the NMGP functioned as an active sovereignty flashpoint and coup-legitimising narrative (Section 5.3), with no governance safeguards currently embedded in pipeline agreements.

7.4 Locally led security sector reform

Responsible bodies: French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, G5 Sahel Executive Secretariat, ECOWAS Defence Commissions.

Action: Establish a multi-donor SSR trust fund managed by a joint civil-military council in each Sahelian state, with majority representation from national parliaments, civil society, and non-commissioned officers rather than senior officers alone; shift training emphasis from elite counter-terrorism units, which the evidence shows become coup-enabling praetorian guards, toward broad-based professional military education

stressing constitutional loyalty and civil-military relations; and introduce transparent, independently audited, merit-based promotion systems to reduce the factional competition external patrons currently exploit.

Rationale: this directly addresses the finding that perceived Western security failure was the primary driver of realignment toward Russia (Section 5.1), while reducing structural dependency on any single external patron.

7.5 A phased, bilateral security substitution model for AES–ECOWAS reintegration

Responsible bodies: Alliance of Sahel States Joint Secretariat, ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, African Union Peace and Security Council, with AU/UN monitoring.

Action: Negotiate enforceable milestones with fixed deadlines: inclusive national dialogues within 6 months; a verified voter registry and electoral calendar within 12 months; a constitutional referendum restoring term limits within 18 months; internationally monitored elections within 24 months in exchange for immediate suspension of remaining sanctions, phased development-aid resumption, diplomatic normalisation, and a formal commitment against ICC pursuit of leaders who step down voluntarily. Rather than requiring immediate, unilateral termination of agreements with Russian PMCs as a precondition for reintegration an ultimatum that risks entrenching AES states in permanent institutional separation this recommendation is reframed as a phased, bilateral security substitution model: ECOWAS and international partners jointly fund and deploy vetted, professionalised alternative security assistance (training, equipment, intelligence-sharing) calibrated to substitute incrementally for PMC-provided security functions, with PMC drawdown milestones synchronised to the verified delivery of substitute capacity rather than announced as a unilateral demand. Economic incentives (targeted development financing, restoration of trade preferences) are released in step with verified drawdown, ensuring that the security and economic dimensions of reintegration move in tandem rather than requiring security concessions to precede economic reward.

Rationale: this responds to the finding that AES functions as a 'coup-protection pact' offering juntas no current incentive to transition (Sections 5.4–5.5; Table 5, Mechanism 5), while avoiding a punitive framing that the evidence suggests would push juntas toward permanent separation rather than negotiated reintegration; absent a credible, dignified, and economically competitive alternative pathway, the evidence indicates military rule will entrench indefinitely.

8. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the July 2023 military coup in Niger, and the broader 2014–2024 coup wave in Francophone West Africa, cannot be adequately explained by domestic governance failure alone, nor by external geopolitical competition alone, but by their dialectical interaction. Internal micro-grievances, weak civilian control over the military, elite capture, and resource-curse poverty amid uranium wealth created the domestic preconditions for crisis. At the same time, macro-level hegemonic contestation between the US–France Atlantic alliance and an expanding Russia–China bloc provided the necessary conditions for coup consolidation and survival, principally through the five formalised mechanisms of proxy rivalry set out in Table 5.

The Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline emerged as a critical and previously under-examined geo-economic variable, functioning simultaneously as a sovereignty flashpoint, a bargaining chip, and a contributing cause of political vulnerability. Understood through the three-tier nested framework of World-Systems Theory, Geoeconomic Theory, and classical realist Power Theory (Section 2), these coups represent a form of primitive accumulation by force, a restructuring of regional political economy from Franco-centric extraction toward multipolar patronage arrangements, with control over uranium, gold, and prospective gas revenues determining geopolitical alignment as much as declared political principle. Restoring durable constitutional governance in the Sahel will require regional and international actors to move beyond normative frameworks calibrated for a unipolar moment that has passed, toward targeted sanctions, performance-based incentives, infrastructure governance safeguards, locally led security sector reform, and negotiated, phased transition pathways capable of competing with the alternative patronage architecture that now structures the region's political economy.

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