



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The uranium triangle between Niger, Iran, and Russia—a cause for concern



When Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Niger 11 years ago, he was greeted with messages of support from student organisations and a request to the government to conclude a uranium deal with Tehran.

"Areva has exploited us for over 40 years. What the Nigerien people need is a fair partnership," the Nigerien student union demanded of its government, furious about the agreement with the French partner at the time.

Today, Iran is on the verge of a solid uranium partnership with Niger, one of the world's largest producers. In addition, there are repeated unconfirmed reports that the deal for the Iranian purchase of 300 metric tonnes of concentrated uranium for \$56 million is in its final stages.

The junta in the capital, Niamey, has recently denied such reports as US-produced "fake news," but few would be surprised if the uranium shipments Tehran has been expecting for years were to arrive in Iran soon.

The US and its allies have few options for preventing such arrangements between two rogue regimes. Should the uranium trade between Niger and Iran get off the ground, it would be one of the most serious consequences so far of the coup in Niger last July.

The risk becomes even greater when one considers the advanced agreements between the coup plotters in Niger and Russia, according to which the Russian nuclear giant Rosatom is to take over the management of Niger's uranium capacities from the French operators.

Long preparation

Isolated Iran has long been trying to fulfil its growing demand for nuclear raw materials in Niger, but without success. During apartheid the country relied on imports from South Africa and later from Russia, while the West thwarted attempts to import from Kazakhstan,

the world's largest exporter.

The military coup and the overthrow of democratic President Mohamed Bazoum in July 2023 provided scope for a full confrontation between Niger and the West, as well as opening the door for autocratic partners, particularly Iran and Russia.

The uranium trade was certainly one of the more significant topics of discussion between the leaders of the junta in Niger and the Iranian leadership, which became very frequent after the coup.

Tehran places great importance on potential supplies from Niger because Iran's demand for uranium significantly exceeds domestic production

Last October, then Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi held talks in Tehran with the junta's foreign minister, Yaou Sangaré Bakary, and Ali Mehman Lamine, the coup's prime minister, visited the Iranian capital last January.

Tehran places great importance on potential supplies from Niger because Iran's demand for uranium significantly exceeds domestic production and the sanctions limit import possibilities.

The demand for electricity generation in nuclear power plants in 2020 was around 160,000 tonnes, and the forecast annual uranium production until 2025 is twice as low.

A boost for the Iranian military programme

The real reason for concern regarding a possible agreement to supply Iran with uranium from Niger, however, is the country's growing potential to enrich uranium to weapons-grade levels.

In a report from last February, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)

stated that Iran was able to accelerate and increase its weapons-grade uranium production capacity because its enriched uranium stockpile and enrichment capacity have been increasing.

Therefore, the political change in Niger was a salutary option for Iran's civilian and even military nuclear ambitions.

Russia's intentions for managing uranium deposits in Niger and the simultaneous agreements on uranium deliveries to Iran are related processes

In the meantime, the extremely anti-Western junta in Niamey has managed to get rid of first the French and then the American military presence in the country, while embracing Iran and particularly Russia as the powers it wants to fill the alliance vacuum for.

Rosatom, a Russian state nuclear company, has been trying to take over the management of Niger's uranium facilities, although the French owner Orano stated that it knows nothing about the deals and is continuing its activities in Niger.

However, the junta in Niamey has shown great affection for Moscow since the coup last July, and the deal with Rosatom would only be a logical continuation of the shift that resulted from the military coup.

Russia's intentions for managing uranium deposits in Niger and the simultaneous agreements on uranium deliveries to Iran are undoubtedly related processes.

The West has few options

The two autocratic allies have found a friendly military government in Niger that is willing to accommodate their strategic interests in relation to the use of uranium.

The last attempt by the US to maintain some

kind of communication with the junta in Niger ended ingloriously last March after a visit by State Department official Molly Phee, and shortly after that meeting, Niger asked US troops to leave the country.



Russia and Iran have found a friendly military government in Niger that is willing to accommodate their strategic interests in relation to the use of uranium - Nigerien PM Ali Mahamane Lamine Zeine

“First, you have come here to threaten us in our country. That is unacceptable. And you have come here to tell us with whom we can have relationships, which is also unacceptable. And you have done it all with a condescending tone and a lack of respect,” Prime Minister Ali Mahamane Lamine Zeine **told** The Washington Post about the course of the conversation.

Apart from economic sanctions against the military government in Niger, the US and its European allies have few other visible options to influence the coup leaders' moves. Even regarding sanctions, there is still no agreement between the Western partners, leaving Niger with a lot of room for deals with partners from Moscow and Tehran.

Uranium cooperation forms the foundation of these relations, with Moscow and Tehran each playing a complementary role towards Niger, a role that Niger is happy to accept.

Although Niger, the world's seventh-largest uranium producer with about 4–5% of the world's reserves, cannot significantly disrupt global supply, its accelerated slide into secret deals with rogue regimes is cause for concern.