



EXAMINATION BRIEFING

Niger's meteorite dispute: resource governance and geopolitical shifts in the Sahel

Welcome to Global Weekly's Examination Briefing series.

Global Weekly is your trusted source for understanding the complexities of today's world. By staying ahead of the curve with our comprehensive analysis, you can make informed decisions and develop strategies to navigate the ever-changing global environment.

Our international team of dedicated analysts brings you comprehensive insights and analysis on critical events and trends worldwide. Whether it's political shifts, economic changes, or social movements, we delve deep into the factors driving these events and offer our expert perspectives.

Our Examination Briefings provide in-depth articles that delve into both notable and under-discussed geopolitical issues, accompanied by the exceptional analysis for which Global Weekly is known. We consider historical contexts, current situations, and future projections to provide a well-rounded view of global affairs and share the information that you need to remain informed.

Peripheral Regions

Salome von Stolzmann

Niger's meteorite dispute: resource governance and geopolitical shifts in the Sahel

Executive summary

- A USD\$5 million Martian meteorite from Niger was sold at a New York City auction; in response, Niger launched an "illicit trafficking" investigation.
- Niger has challenged the meteorite trade through the UNESCO cultural heritage framework, demonstrating anti-Western sovereignty assertion influenced by Russian resource extraction models.
- Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso will likely coordinate geological export bans, and Russian influence will likely grow as West African countries reject Western presence.

Context

In July, a 25 kg meteorite, which is the largest piece of Mars discovered on Earth by a meteorite hunter, was [sold](#) at a New York auction house for \$5 million. The meteorite was found in Niger, which in response to the sale launched an investigation into what officials deem "illicit international trafficking." Meteorite hunters often target the Sahel state for their access to the Sahara Desert, which has unique preservation conditions.

Analysis

Saharan countries have become a prime location for meteorite discovery. The meteorite in question, NWA 16788, was found by a meteorite hunter and sold on to an international dealer before ending up at the auction house in New York. Sotheby, the auction house, did clarify that the meteorite had all necessary documentation, indicating that there has not been any "illicit international trafficking." The case raises larger questions about how celestial objects are governed. The [UN Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space](#) states that "outer space is not subject to national appropriation by claim of sovereignty, by means of use or occupation, or by any other means."

Depending on the categorisation of meteorites as part of outer space vs fallen objects, Niger does not have a claim on meteorites based on discovery within their national territory. The Outer Space Treaty is additionally part of the [UN common heritage of mankind principle](#) (later updated to humankind.) This further underlines that meteorites could be classified as the common heritage of humankind and therefore a legal framework governing meteorites should be determined by the UN. The jurisdiction of meteorites remains a legal grey area, however, as there are no specific provisions in space treaties regarding the governing of meteorites. This jurisdictional ambiguity creates a dilemma between applying celestial legal principles governing space objects versus terrestrial legal principles over resources found within national borders. This dispute, along with Morocco trying to establish governing principles for meteorites, could potentially start an international conversation about meteorite legal frameworks.

Niger has argued that the meteorite is akin to cultural heritage, invoking Article 1 of the [UN Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property](#). Subclause 1 defines cultural heritage as “[r]are collections and specimens of fauna, flora, minerals and anatomy, and objects of palaeontological interest.” By invoking the UN cultural property framework, Niger could potentially reclassify meteorites from scientific research objects to cultural property. If successful, Niger this could restrict research access for scientists studying celestial objects in the Sahel. There is a moderate risk that Niger could tie research access to broader trade agreements, development aid, or diplomatic concessions.

Niger’s provisional president Abdourahamane Tiani is likely using the dispute over meteorite NWA 16788 to demonstrate the legitimacy of his position. In addition to Niger’s claim of illicit trafficking of NWA 16788, President Tiani has [signed](#) a decree temporarily suspending the export of precious stones, semi-precious stones, and meteorites through his country. By controlling the flow of precious stones, Tiani is forcing all actors involved in the trade of precious stones, semi-precious stones, and meteorites to go through government-run channels. This will likely increase revenue for the government, and Tiani can potentially claim a political victory by demonstrating strength against the exploitation of Niger’s natural resources. It likely legitimises his role as provisional President, after gaining power through a [coup d’etat](#) in 2023. Additionally, it will likely deter future meteorite hunters from the country.

It is likely that Niger is using the export ban in the context of its anti-Western and specifically anti-French pivot. Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso have [terminated](#) all defense agreements with France, which authorised the stationing of French troops and entered into the Alliance of Sahel States. Consequently, France withdrew its troops. Banning the export of meteorites and declaring it as cultural property is likely to reinforce sovereignty over its own borders and independence from Western countries. President Tiani is likely exploring ways to strengthen Niger's partnership with Russia further to diminish Western influence and regime stability in exchange for meteorite rights found in Niger's territory. Russia's [approach](#) to mineral extraction in Africa has likely influenced Tiani's decision to halt the export of precious stones, meteorites, and the like.

Africa [holds](#) about 40 percent of the world's gold and the largest reserves of diamonds. Gold and diamonds enable Russia to bypass economic sanctions imposed since the invasion of Ukraine. In return, Russia can [offer](#) regime survival to African governments in exchange for the right to extract their natural resources. Niger's export ban could potentially trigger similar export bans across the Sahel regions. Mali and Burkina Faso, which strongly [support](#) President Tiani and have strong ties to Russia, are likely to follow Niger's suit and leverage their military power to influence member states of the Economic Community of West African States. It is likely that Niger, Mali, and Russia will considerably strengthen their economic ties with Russia to have additional security guarantees against militant jihadist groups, such as Al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). The group has [caused](#) over 1000 civilian casualties since April this year across the three countries.

Recently, Niger has transformed its Uranium sector, [replacing](#) French interests with Russian. The new partnership with Russia promises domestic energy development for Niger. The expulsion of France from Niger's nuclear sector, which [supplied](#) about 25 percent of the EU's uranium needs, was likely closely coordinated with Moscow. The expulsion of French interests in June 2025 was closely followed by a formal Russian nuclear agreement in July. Niger revoked permits for French uranium operations, followed by nationalisation. The meteorite export ban follows a similar trajectory, asserting the national interest in valuable resources, which challenges access and provides leverage for new partnerships. Niger will likely collaborate closely with Russia as the meteorite dispute continues.

A coordinated export ban on scientific objects, such as meteorites, could potentially cut off Western scientific access to a geologically significant region. It is likely that Western scientific

agencies, such as NASA or ESA, face the choice of Russian-mediated access or losing research opportunities. Niger is not the only country addressing meteorite hunting. Morocco, where a large number of meteorites are found, [requires](#) meteorites found on its territory to be returned. To legally export a meteorite, meteorite hunters [must](#) obtain permission from the Geological Service of Morocco, specifying the meteorite's size, a photograph, and the coordinates of where it was found. Niger represents a combative model, where meteorites become economic and political leverage. Morocco is following a more collaborative approach; instead of a blanket export ban, it will consider the export on an individual basis while maintaining sovereignty over its geological heritage. It is highly likely that countries with a strong link to Russia and Niger, such as Mali and Burkina Faso, will adopt Niger's model.

Forecast

The meteorite dispute could represent a broader shift in resource governance. Niger's assertion of meteorites as cultural property presents a challenge to how scientific objects are governed. Developing nations are likely to leverage international legal frameworks about cultural heritage to gain more geopolitical advantages. The precedent Niger creates could likely extend beyond meteorites. Reclassifying meteorites as cultural property could affect rare minerals, fossils, and archeological finds. The Alliance of Sahel States could potentially create an exclusion from one of Earth's most geologically significant regions. Russia's strong foothold in the Sahel is likely to encourage African states to use their geological assets as leverage against Western states and institutions.

Niger will likely assert more control over its geological resources, including controlling meteorite hunting in its territory. President Tiani will likely coordinate export bans with his strongest allies in the region, Mali and Burkina Faso, which are both controlled by the military junta. The meteorite precedent will likely extend beyond celestial objects to include fossils and archeological specimens across the Alliance of Sahel states. Russia's influence in Niger and the Sahel will very likely expand as many West African countries are seeking to expel Western influence.

About Us

Global Weekly offers comprehensive coverage and expert analysis to keep you informed about the world's most pressing issues. Our team of experienced analysts and journalists ensures that our content is accurate, reliable, and relevant.

Who We Are

Global Weekly is a leading provider of insightful news and analysis on global events. We specialise in delivering up-to-date information on geopolitical trends, international security, and global economic developments.

Contact Us

For business inquiries and more information, reach out to us via:

- Email: info@global-weekly.com

- Phone: +44 7802 751 990

Follow us on social media:

- LinkedIn: Global Weekly (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/global-weekly>)

Rights & Content

All content published by Global Weekly is the intellectual property of Global Weekly LLP and may not be reproduced without permission. © 2025 Global Weekly. All rights reserved.

