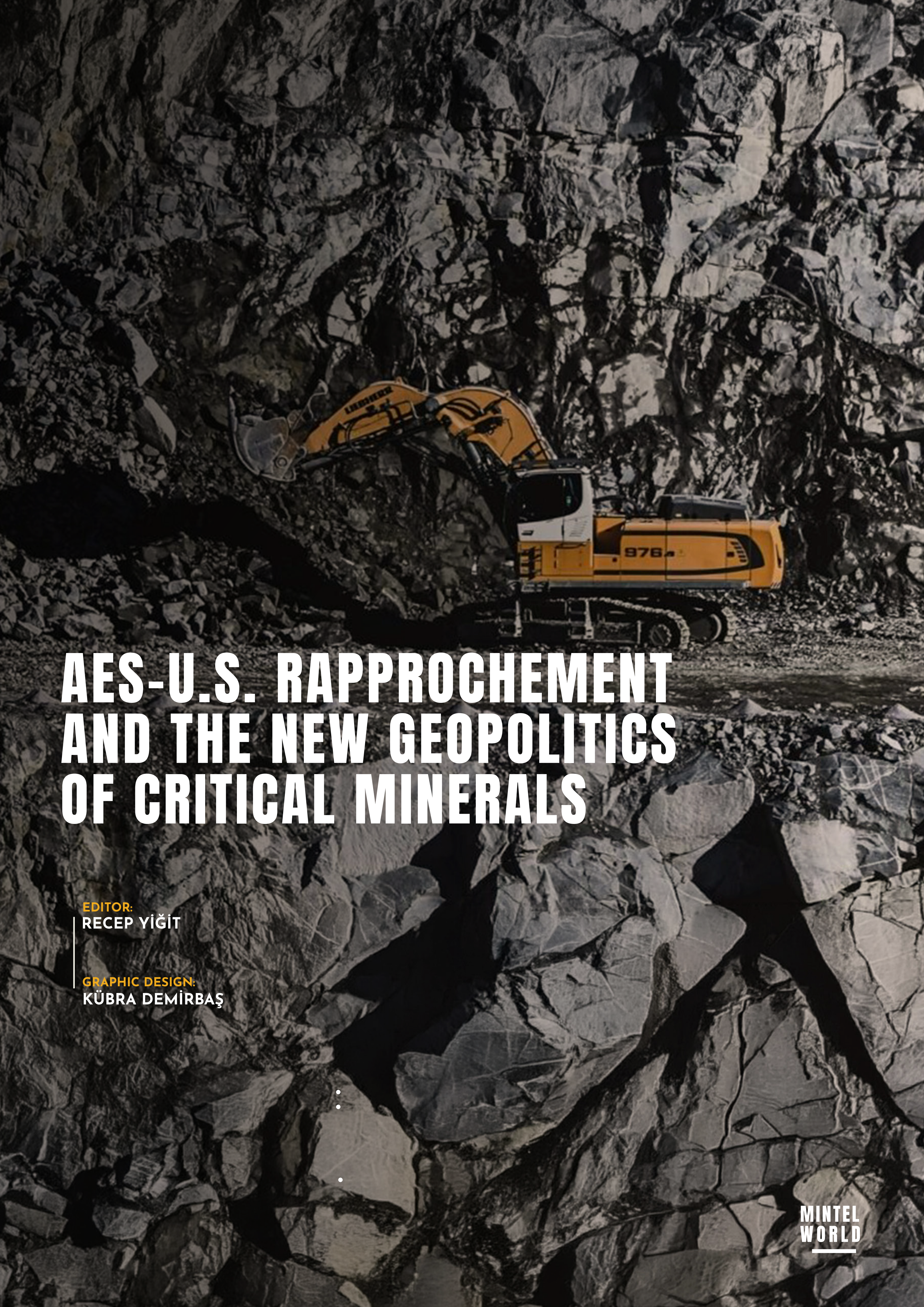

AES-U.S. RAPPROCHEMENT AND THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF CRITICAL MINERALS

EDITOR:
RECEP YİĞİT

GRAPHIC DESIGN:
KÜBRA DEMİRBAŞ

MINTEL WORLD

AES–U.S. RAPPROCHEMENT AND THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF CRITICAL MINERALS

The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) has approved up to $414.2 million in financing for the Dasa uranium project operated by Canada's Global Atomic in Niger. Around the same time, Mali has been seeking to attract American capital by offering gold, manganese and, particularly, lithium assets to the Trump administration. Although these two developments may appear to be minor technical developments when viewed in isolation, they are part of a broader trend. Following the coups of 2023, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), comprising Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, pursued a foreign policy that excluded France and leaned toward Russia, while also cautiously opening a channel with the United States throughout 2026. The driving force behind this rapprochement is not ideological but a concrete calculation at the intersection of mining interests and security needs.

BREAK FROM THE PAST AND THE SEARCH FOR A NEW OPENING AFTER THE COUPS

Relations between the United States and the three AES member states were shaped by a sharp rupture following the successive coups of 2023. After the coup in July 2023, the United States withdrew its troops from Niger and fully vacated its drone base in Agadez in August 2024. Relations with Mali and Burkina Faso also deteriorated along similar lines. In December 2025, Bamako and Ouagadougou responded to the Trump administration's entry ban on their citizens with reciprocal bans.

Nevertheless, the American approach changed noticeably from the beginning of 2026. In February, Nick Checker, an official from the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs, visited Bamako, conveying a message of respect for Mali's sovereignty, before travelling on to Niger and Burkina Faso. Officials describe these steps as pragmatic rather than principled cooperation, acknowledging that although they do not approve of how the juntas came to power, expectations of a democratic transition are no longer being allowed to take precedence over economic and security interests. The opening has two pillars:

1-The restoration of intelligence and security cooperation against armed groups in the region.
2-Securing critical mineral supplies.

CAPITAL ENTERS WHERE THE MILITARY HAS LEFT

Having withdrawn its military presence from Niger, the United States is now returning through capital. The DFC approval for the Dasa project does not mean that the funds have already been disbursed, as the financing remains subject to various conditions. Nevertheless, the timing of the decision is noteworthy. Relations between Niger and its former concession holder, France's Orano, have deteriorated since 2024 to the point of being taken to international arbitration. After losing control of its assets, Orano filed a lawsuit, while Niamey began seeking alternatives to French dominance in the mining sector. The entry of American financing into this space therefore serves Niger's efforts to diversify foreign actors in its uranium industry. At the same time, the security situation remains unstable, forcing Global Atomic to consider shifting its export routes either across the Sahara toward Algeria or through the Togo–Burkina Faso corridor. This demonstrates that economic rapprochement cannot progress independently of logistical realities.

Mali, meanwhile, is seeking to diversify its external partners by offering gold, manganese and, particularly, lithium assets to the Trump administration. According to the French publication Africa Intelligence, the Bamako government conveyed this offer directly to Washington. China's Ganfeng Lithium holds a majority stake in Goulamina, Mali's largest lithium project, while the Malian state is a minority shareholder. At the Bougouni project, most of the production is also planned to be directed toward the Chinese market. For American companies, entering this market would mean competing with a rival whose infrastructure and commercial relationships are already well established. Bamako's calculation is clear: while maintaining its dependence on Russia in the security sphere, it seeks to prevent China from becoming dominant in mining. American investment is therefore being presented as an additional option alongside existing partnerships, rather than as a replacement for them.

THE OPENING OF A POLITICAL CHANNEL

The economic offers coincide with a political backdrop. On 27 February 2026, the United States lifted sanctions on Mali's defense minister, Sadio Camara, and other officials viewed as having links to Russian mercenary forces. It subsequently moved closer to an agreement that would allow U.S. aircraft and drones to resume intelligence-gathering flights over Mali. Relations with Burkina Faso have followed a more turbulent course. As of September 2026, the reciprocal entry ban introduced in December 2025 remains in force, and the restriction has been limited to travel. Nevertheless, as early as March 2026, the State Department raised the possibility of lifting the suspension on military equipment exports to Burkina Faso, expressing an intention to revive relations. In other words, the visa crisis and the security and economic channels are progressing independently of one another. While the political rupture persists, technical cooperation channels can still be reopened separately.

However, the figures indicate that the scale of the rapprochement should not be overstated. Even before the coups, these countries' annual export volumes to the United States were already quite low. Mali's annual exports to the United States amounted to just $4.6 million, while Burkina Faso's stood at $3.7 million. Niger, the largest trading partner among the three, saw its exports to the United States decline from $94.6 million in 2021 to as little as $46.9 million in 2023 following the coup process. The winding down of USAID is narrowing America's development-financing instruments, while the capacity of institutions such as the DFC to shoulder the burden remains limited. The political legitimacy of Mali and Niger rests largely on sovereignty-centered rhetoric. This discourages them from rapidly loosening their relations with Russia and China. Niger's nationalization of uranium assets and cancellation of French mining licenses mean that American companies would also be operating under a similar risk. Despite $3.3 billion in security assistance over two decades, armed groups in the region have continued to gain territory. This undermines the credibility of America's security partnership offer. The example of Mali clearly demonstrates how fragile the rapprochement remains. Indeed, Sadio Camara, the defense minister whose sanctions the United States lifted, was killed in an attack on 25 April 2026.

AN OPENING BASED ON MUTUAL CALCULATION, NOT A ONE-SIDED SHIFT

The rapprochement between the AES states and the United States does not signal a period in which the juntas are breaking away from Russia and China, nor one in which America is re-establishing a military presence in the region. Niamey and Bamako are pursuing a strategy of opening their mineral wealth to multiple powers simultaneously in order to avoid dependence on any single partner. The United States, meanwhile, appears willing to set aside its political reservations to secure critical mineral supplies. Mali's lithium offer does not alter China's position in Goulamina and Bougouni. Niger's Dasa financing does not resolve the ongoing arbitration case with Orano. The emerging picture is not one of an ideological realignment, but rather of a transactional and reversible opening in which each actor negotiates simultaneously with multiple partners to strengthen its own vulnerable position.

MINTEL WORLD

a new-generation international consultancy specialising in the fields of conflict, energy and geopolitical analysis.

Istanbul, Turkey
contact@mintelworld.com
https://www.mintelworld.com/