



THE US-CONGO MINERAL PARTNERSHIP: IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICA'S ECONOMIC AND GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE





Introduction

Africa's rich endowment with sufficient critical minerals has sparked interest from importing countries. This shift has led to a growing number of multilateral, bilateral or state-to-state agreements aimed at boosting production, securing access to critical minerals and countering other countries' dominance in critical mineral supply chains.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), holds some of the world's largest deposits of these essential minerals. As countries, particularly the United States, look to secure stable and diverse mineral supply chains, the US-Congo mineral partnership has become a focal point of interest. As both sides seek to enhance their economic, strategic, and geopolitical interests, the partnership between the United States and the Congo holds implications for both Africa and the broader international landscape.



The Rising Importance of Critical Minerals

Critical minerals are indispensable for a range of industries, including electric vehicle (EV) production, renewable energy, telecommunications, and defense. As the world shifts towards cleaner energy, demand for minerals such as cobalt, lithium, and nickel is surging. These materials are essential in technologies like EV batteries, solar panels, and wind turbines—key components of the global push for decarbonization.

These minerals are also necessary for the transition from fuel-based economies to non-fuel or non carbon-based economies. Additionally, they offer opportunities for the countries where they are found, developed, and refined; when managed transparently and responsibly. Mining and processing of critical minerals have the potential to fuel economic development and improve community stability, peace, and security

For the United States, securing a stable and diversified supply of these minerals is central to both economic and national security. The DRC, with its immense cobalt reserves (responsible for around 70% of the world's supply), stands at the forefront of this geopolitical and economic competition. In addition to cobalt, the DRC also holds vast deposits of copper, lithium, and rare earth elements, which are critical for the future of green technologies.



The US–Congo Mineral Partnership

The US–Congo mineral partnership is a key component of the broader strategy to diversify critical mineral sources outside of China's sphere of influence. China has been actively mining in Africa for more than two decades, outpacing the United States and other countries in terms of speed, amount of production, and investment in mining-related infrastructure. China also dominates the processing of critical minerals, mostly sourced from Africa. Notably, Chinese companies working in Africa have enjoyed heavy backing by their government— a commercial model for mineral development that sharply contrasts with what is employed by most Western countries.

Yet Chinese mining activities fall short in benefiting African host countries, because they often result in environmental degradation, labor abuses, and social inequities that tend to foster resentments in already fragile environments. The intensification of mineral development has also at times led to community upheaval, corruption, and even violent conflict. While the challenges of responsible mining are applicable worldwide, they are particularly acute in many African countries suffering from the “natural resources curse”—conditions where the mineral wealth potential is high, but weaknesses in the rule of law, accountability, public institutions, and civil society have resulted in resource and human exploitation.

The DRC is a focal point of this partnership. The country's cobalt mines, particularly in the southern provinces, are crucial to the global supply chain. However, the DRC's mining industry has been marred by concerns over governance, human

rights abuses, environmental damage, and corruption. Despite these challenges, the US is increasingly engaging with the DRC to establish agreements that aim to improve transparency, labor conditions, and sustainability in the mining sector. The US government, along with private American companies, are pushing for responsible mining practices that could help set international standards and improve conditions in the DRC's mining regions.

One notable example is the US government's support for the creation of initiatives such as the Partnership for Responsible Mining, which promotes ethical extraction and governance reform in the DRC's mining sector. However, the effectiveness of these efforts remain to be fully seen, as many observers point out that foreign involvement has often led to mixed outcomes in the past.

Implications for Africa's Economic and Geopolitical Landscape: A Critical Perspective

The growing interest in Africa's mineral wealth, particularly through the US-Congo partnership, presents both opportunities and risks for the continent's economic and geopolitical future. While this partnership could drive Africa's development in several areas, it also poses significant challenges that could exacerbate existing issues. The DRC's mineral resources, particularly cobalt, hold the potential to reshape the continent's position in global trade, but how these resources are managed will determine whether Africa will experience long-term prosperity or deeper vulnerability.

Opportunities for Africa's Economic Development

Economic Diversification and Growth

The demand for critical minerals like cobalt, lithium, and copper is growing rapidly due to their essential role in the production of electric vehicles, renewable energy technologies, and other industries crucial to the global transition to a greener economy. As a result, Africa, specifically the DRC in this context, stands to benefit from an influx of foreign investment. This investment could lead to diversification of the continent's economy, moving beyond traditional sectors such as agriculture and oil. By focusing on mineral extraction and processing, African countries could establish more robust industrial sectors, stimulating growth in areas like infrastructure, manufacturing, and technology. Additionally, partnerships with global players like the United States offer the possibility of significant infrastructure development, including roads, energy systems, and transportation networks that could benefit the broader economy.

Job Creation and Capacity Building

Partnerships with the US, could bring in technology, skills training, and job opportunities in the mining sector. This could help build local human capital, develop a skilled workforce, and reduce unemployment in countries like the DRC. Additionally, improvements in the local labor market could help lift communities out of poverty, with a focus on creating long-term, sustainable jobs, better working conditions, and promote sustainable economic growth.

Sustainable Development and Ethical Mining

The US, with its focus on responsible mining and ethical practices, has an opportunity to influence better governance in the DRC's mining sector. If successful, this partnership could serve as a model for sustainable mineral extraction across Africa. Ethical mining practices would not only reduce environmental degradation, but also ensure that the wealth generated from these resources is more equitably distributed among local populations. If the mining sector is managed responsibly, it could help African countries avoid the “resource curse,” where abundant natural wealth fails to lead to broader economic development due to corruption, mismanagement, and poor governance. The potential for transparency and accountability in resource management could contribute to a more stable political environment, improving long-term prospects for African nations.

Strategic Global Positioning

Africa's critical minerals make it an important player in the global transition to renewable energy. The US-Congo partnership could help position African countries as central hubs in global supply chains for green technologies. By securing long-term contracts for minerals such as cobalt, Africa could establish itself as an essential partner in the global economy, providing geopolitical leverage in international trade negotiations.

Risks and Challenges for Africa's Development

Dependence on Mineral Exports and the Resource Curse

One of the primary concerns is the potential for continued dependence on mineral exports. African countries, particularly the DRC, could become even more reliant on the extraction of minerals, which would make them vulnerable to fluctuations in global commodity prices. A sharp decline in mineral prices could undermine the continent's economic stability, especially if countries do not take steps to diversify their economies. Over-reliance on mineral extraction may also stifle the development of other sectors, such as agriculture and manufacturing, leading to an economy that remains overly dependent on a single resource with attendant energy security risks. Even with increased foreign investment and improved governance, the risk of mismanagement, corruption, and exploitation remains high. Africa's history of resource extraction is rife with examples of wealth that has failed to trickle down to local communities. Instead, foreign companies often benefit disproportionately, with little reinvestment in local development. If the US-Congo partnership does not focus on equitable wealth distribution and local empowerment, there is a significant risk that the DRC and other African nations will remain trapped in a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment, despite their mineral wealth.

Environmental and Social Risks

The rapid expansion of mining operations, if not carefully regulated, could lead to serious ecological damage, such as deforestation, water contamination, and soil

degradation. While there is a push for sustainable mining practices, the sheer scale of operations required to meet global demand could make it difficult to ensure that all companies adhere to environmental standards. The long-term environmental costs of mining could outweigh the short-term economic gains if stringent protections are not put in place. Additionally, mining operations may disproportionately affect indigenous communities, with local populations bearing the brunt of the environmental and social impacts, without gaining the benefits of the mineral wealth extracted from their land.

Geopolitical Tensions and Exploitation

The geopolitical dynamics surrounding the partnership also pose significant risks. As the US and China compete for influence in Africa's mineral-rich countries, there is a risk that the DRC could become a battleground for geopolitical manoeuvring, with both powers seeking to secure access to minerals, at the expense of Africa's long-term interests. This geopolitical competition could result in Africa being treated as a mere resource provider rather than an equal partner in global trade. Moreover, foreign powers, including the US, may prioritize their own economic and security interests, potentially undermining the sovereignty of African nations. This could result in unequal agreements that benefit multinational corporations rather than the local population.

Weak Governance and Corruption

The DRC and other African countries with significant mineral reserves often struggle with governance issues, including corruption and weak institutions. Despite the US's efforts to promote ethical mining, there is a real risk that these initiatives may not be fully effective in a continent where corrupt practices are deeply entrenched. Foreign companies, including those from the US, might exploit weak governance systems to secure favorable deals that bypass local regulations, thus limiting the positive impact on African communities and reinforcing cycles of inequality and exploitation.

CONCLUSION

The US-Congo mineral partnership, while offering significant opportunities, also brings considerable risks that must be carefully managed to ensure that Africa's mineral wealth translates to genuine, long-term benefits for its people. As the world increasingly shifts towards renewable energy and electric vehicles, Africa's role in the global supply chain for critical minerals, particularly cobalt, has become indispensable. The potential economic windfall from this partnership is immense, from job creation and infrastructure development to the diversification of economies that have long been dependent on agriculture or oil. If managed responsibly, this could be a transformative moment for Africa, one that helps the continent move beyond the so-called "resource curse" and builds a more diversified and resilient economy.

However, the risks cannot be overstated. The prospect of greater dependence on mineral exports poses serious threats to Africa's economic stability, especially if the global commodity market turns volatile. History has shown that without proper governance, mineral wealth can become a source of inequality and social unrest rather than prosperity. The DRC and other African countries with rich mineral deposits must be vigilant to avoid falling into the traps of exploitation and corruption that have characterized much of the continent's resource extraction history. Without a concerted effort to ensure that the wealth generated from these minerals benefits local communities and is reinvested into critical sectors like education, healthcare, and infrastructure, Africa risks perpetuating cycles of poverty and underdevelopment.

Geopolitical risks further complicate this picture. Africa, caught between the US and China's competing interests, could find itself in a precarious position. The continent's wealth in critical minerals places it at the center of a larger geopolitical struggle, with both global powers vying for access to its resources.

Major stakeholders like the African Union should expedite the development of the Africa Critical Minerals Strategy that will guide member countries on negotiating mining contracts and agreements. The strategy should draw from good mining practices around the world and African countries should revise their mining policies and regulations to reflect the opportunities and challenges posed by the increasing global demand for critical minerals.

Finally, for African countries to maximise the economic opportunities arising from the global high demand for critical minerals, African governments must create incentives for the local private sector to be competitive in the industry. Processing of critical minerals in Africa would increase their value on the international market, create jobs, and drive the growth of other sectors of the African economy. Until these are carefully considered and fully implemented, the extraction of Africa's critical minerals by foreign mining companies would likely create another resource curse.

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