



# Not Again: The New Scramble for Africa

## Natural Resource Protection for Long-Term Sustainability

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## Abstract

The propulsion of the Second Industrial Revolution in the late 19th and early 20th century, pioneering large-scale intercontinental extractivism - '[overexploitation and appropriation of natural resources](#).' The political, social and ecological control of African communities for targeted mining activities birthed "development" in countries in the Global Majority. Throughout history, there has yet to be a level of extractivism since the Imperial quest, or are we in the midst of a sequel? The "[idea of development became tied to economic growth, leaving human welfare in a subordinate position](#)", and the environment even lower in some cases. This brief centres on the potential of Africa's critical mineral wealth to propel the global green transition or deepen its development challenges by acting as a global mine. The main point is that a new green order comes at a cost - who pays the price? [Sub-Saharan Africa alone holds 30% of proven global reserves for the energy transition minerals](#)." Through deliberate investment in local manufacturing, traceability systems and long-term technology transfer, the present crossroads present an opportunity that will not leave resource-rich African countries scrambling to fund their futures.

## What is the situation?

As we take stock of global innovation, [the energy transition is proliferating world economies, although unevenly distributed](#). [McKinsey](#) listed 25 physical challenges that must be overcome for the transition to succeed, with very little detail on the extraction of raw materials, reinforcing the idea that Africa's mineral wealth is a geological happenstance rather than a strategic asset. The race to secure minerals for the global energy transition has turned resource endowment into geopolitical currency. Not recognising this defaults African economies to the East-West power struggle - a *New Scramble for Africa*. The disconnect between extraction (Africa), refining and production (Global) has an approximate manufacturing value of \$89 billion annually and job creation for 8.3 million people that is being forfeited (Centre for Critical Minerals and Mining Policy). "[In the energy transition, Africa's minerals are not just assets. They are negotiating power. Whether that power is used is a political choice](#)." Whilst the Continent's critical minerals can create a low-carbon future for its people, flipping the coin reveals a need for protective action against the [repetition of previous extractivist trends](#). A new race to control the origins of the critical minerals has emerged between the well-known West and the emerging Eastern giant, that is, China. This extractive imperialism falls under the phenomenon of a *Great Super-exploitation and Mega-extraction of Africa's Critical Minerals*, explored in the pages to follow.

## Strategic Investment from the West

The Africa Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace noted that the [lack of required geological technology for mineral resource exploitation](#) in African countries defaults Western powers like the United Nations development partners. The current state of geological under-exploration and being at a disadvantage in geological sciences should alert African countries that mineral-based industrialisation will not be effective.

[Canada's G7 Critical Mineral Action Plan](#) began putting forward US\$6.4 billion, with plans to mobilise more through public-private investments, reflecting the country's need to acquire many critical minerals through immediate, scale investments. The worry about securing future supply chains reflects Canada's recognition of the role of CM as the building blocks. The policy

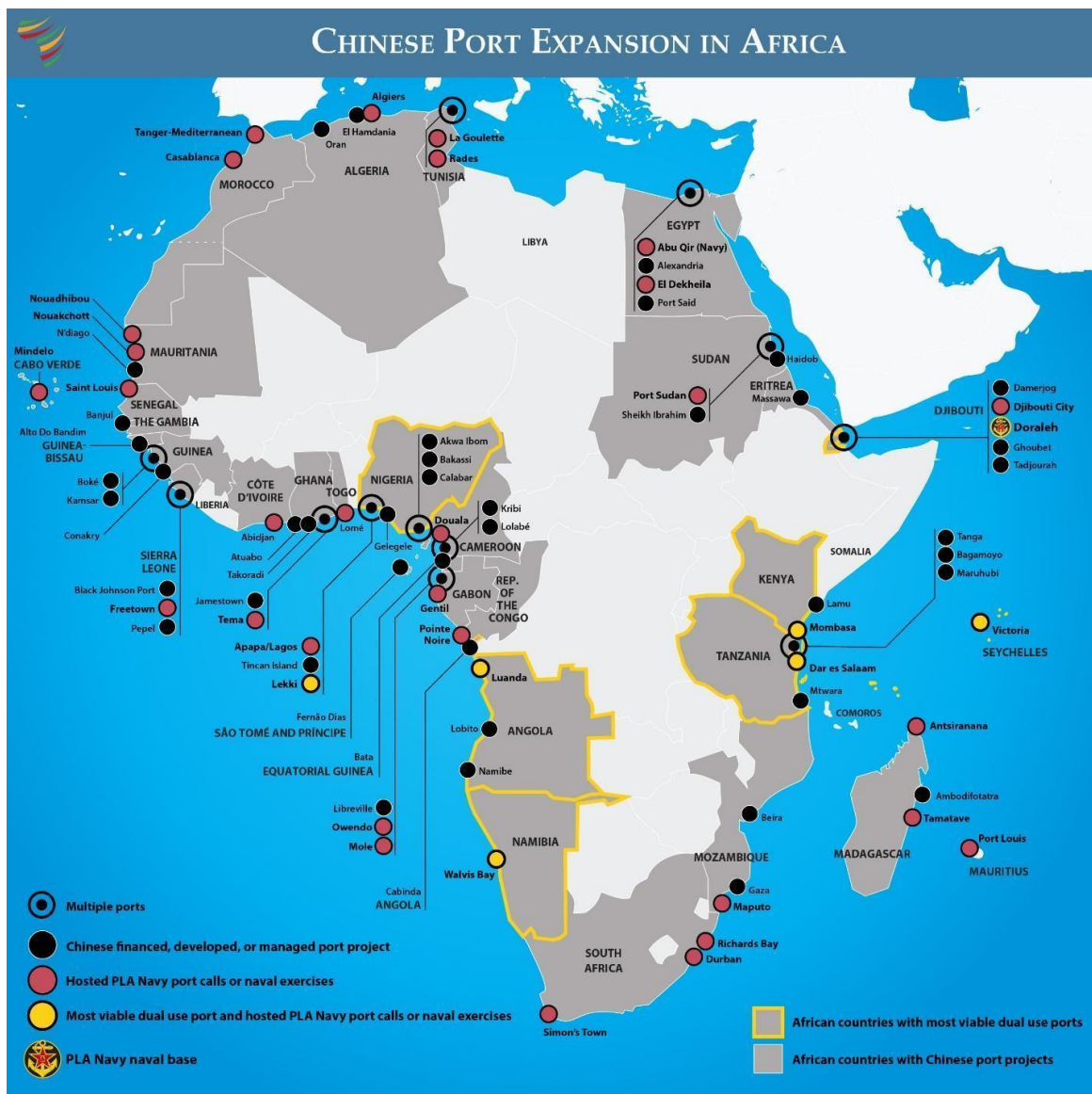
anticipates potential for global supply disruptions due to geopolitical tensions, but what does this mean? The movement of critical minerals requires strategic infrastructure- railways, ports, roads, waterways and power lines.

The commitment of the West- specifically the European Union (EU) and the United States - has arrived sooner than most realise. The Lobito Corridor will connect Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zambia, bridging transport, critical minerals and markets. The energy transition has moved the United States from aid-based initiatives to infrastructure investment, signifying the first of its kind by Washington DC. The full potential of the Lobito corridor will only be realised depending on the ability of the EU to fully build the capacity of its African partners.

### **Strategic Investment from the East**

Globally, [China controls 50% of critical minerals production and 87% of mineral processing and refining](#). On the African continent, China has used state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to aggressively invest and acquire mines in numerous African countries. The Chinese-built Tazara Railway, which opened in 1976, provided another copper export corridor to the port of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. These SOEs have acquired the following: China Minmetals Corporation bought Botswana's Khoemacau copper mine (valued at US\$1.875 billion); China's Ganfeng Lithium Group has a 65% stake in Mali's Goulamina lithium mine (valued at US\$2.94 billion) and China's Shenghe Resources has an 84% stake in Tanzania's Ngualla rare earth mine (share value US\$195 million) all in three years (2023-2025)! These investments made under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are backed by US\$25 billion mining loans issued by three Chinese policy banks. This ensures China's stake in rail, ports, and power grid networks linked to global shipping lanes, through the 2030 Sustainable Agenda that is still being pursued despite all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) being off-track.

The tragic story of [extractivism in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#) (hereafter referred to as Congo) intensified under Belgian colonialism through forced labour, exploitation and segregated cities. With the explosion of electric vehicles (EVs), cobalt is used in rechargeable lithium-ion batteries, key to preventing batteries from overheating and extending their life. Now, what does a country with over 50% of the world's cobalt reserve and producing 70% of the global supply look like? Who supplies this labour? The answers are poverty-stricken and children. Now, not all of Congo is poor, and not all children work in cobalt mines. [Illegal mining contributes significantly to Sub-Saharan Africa](#), including generating foreign exchange, reducing unemployment, sustaining livelihoods, promoting rural development, and reducing hunger and poverty. However, amongst unequal reinvestment of cobalt exports and human rights abuses, there is widespread environmental degradation. In Congo, we are witnessing the largest-scale tragedy of the commons along with the environmentalisation of the poor. The current [Commodities Consensus](#) relies on implicit or explicit agreements that more is needed because more is mind. The voices of green technologists. Developmentalists and economists boom over the quiet whimpers of the resource-rich poor. The promise of national development, cobalt in Congo brings informal artisanal mining networks, perpetuates inequality, fuels conflict and undermines sustainable development in the region.



### A New Golden Ticket - The Gulf

The Arabian Peninsula has dubbed mining the third pillar of its economic diversification beyond its current oil dependency. Whilst seemingly following global decarbonization trends, research indicates [Saudi Arabia's potential for copper, lithium, cobalt, nickel and rare-earth elements](#). The Saudi Vision 2030 has identified 45 critical minerals with an exceeding value of US\$2.5 trillion, with Oman's Mining Strategy following suit with investments in copper, chromite, gold, gypsum, limestone, and silica. Driven by the need to establish new trade corridors and establish itself as a global hub for electric vehicles, battery manufacturing, and energy transition technologies, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) — particularly through the UAE's Operation US\$300bn and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 — is making significant strategic investments in African mining and energy sectors. Crucially, between 2012 and 2025, investments from GCC into Africa grew to more than US\$179 billion in critical minerals, renewable energy, agriculture, ports, agriculture and

logistics, with the UAE investing US\$64.3 billion (whose trade with the continent increased by 30% to US\$100 billion in 2024), Saudi Arabia US\$28.7 billion, and Qatar US\$9.2 billion.

Through their [non-colonial, complementarity-based, South–South cooperation-based and non-interventionist engagements](#) with the continent, the GCC is strategically positioning itself as an attractive alternative to both Chinese and Western investments while strategically recentring African agency through placing Africa at the centre of future growth. The cases of port and corridor construction by the UAE's DP World in Somaliland, Mozambique, and Senegal, and six major green hydrogen projects in Sub-Saharan Africa announced by Emirati companies in 2023 (the largest of which is a US\$34 billion project in Mauritania) are illuminating. However, the GCC is entering Africa at a time when the continent is a chessboard for high-stakes global geopolitical competition among the superpowers (notably China, the European Union, and the United States), thereby adding new layers and dimensions of complexity to the already heightened global geopolitical scramble for African Critical Minerals. Another vital layer and stripe of complexity is the surge of resource nationalism in Africa, with at least 14 countries enacting laws banning the export of raw mineral ores since 2023.

### **The Real Cost of Decarbonization**

Across the seas in Indonesia, Nickel deposits support the Chinese stainless steel and electric vehicles (EV) industries as critical minerals are now the backbone of batteries and power grids. This is causing widespread deforestation as the ambitious *hiliarisasi* plan to position Indonesia as a global nickel competitor. As of January 2026, Danantara Indonesia dispersed US\$6 billion, 2.2 billion reserved for the Nickel industry in the Morowali Industrial Area. The question of whether or not nickel industrialisation is boosting economic sovereignty or reproducing dependency under the green extractivist agenda also remains to be answered. It has been found that the '[global decarbonization agenda accelerates recarbonization and deepens fossil fuel dependency in mineral-rich countries, reinforcing social and environmental injustices associated with nickel extraction](#).' Since 2020, the Government enforced a ban on the export of raw nickel ore and revoked mining licenses for companies in the nickel-rich Raja Ampat region, with 52% forest cover, and seeks to lose it as extraction in the name of a low-carbon transition continues.

### **Chile - A Country Saving Itself**

Resource extraction across the Global majority is not monolithic; countries such as Chile are using their critical mineral reserves to pursue national development interests. Chile holds the largest lithium reserves (31%) (USGS, 2025). Here, the most important lithium deposits are found in brines, a mixture of water and salts located in the underground heart of the high Andean salt flats. The global climate agenda has resulted in a '[lithium boom](#)' that furthers [water injustice, marginalisation and green extractivism](#). This highlights a growing phenomenon in which Global South Countries become the sites for mineral extraction in the context of global decarbonization agendas. [The global resource boom, increasing demand for extractive resources](#), fundamentally changes how we engage with a country's natural resource management.

Chile also holds the world's largest copper reserves, contributing to 58% of the country's exports (ADB). Through this industry, the country has demonstrated how strategic management of mineral

resources can drive national development. However, the country still grapples with broad-based developments, particularly poverty, due to economic inequalities. Additionally, 97% of mining suppliers in Chile are small to medium-sized business enterprises (SMEs) with only 3% possessing advanced technologies. However, resource extraction comes at an environmental cost in this case - water stress. This water stress has been induced by climate change-induced drought and a declining ore grade that requires more water for processing. Companies such as BHP, Codelco, and Antofagasta Minerals had already begun investing in desalination before 2022. [These desalination trends have been adopted by agriculture and city planning officials](#) as well. Chile has integrated reusing and desalination into its national water planning, showcasing that despite market pressures and environmental changes, the pursuit of national interests can weather the storms.

### **The landscape as it is now - Recommendations**

We have two types of extractivism: the slow burn of Chinese investment that arrived on the continent and has stayed longer, compared to the flash in the pan of Western investment to 'de-risk' the control of critical mineral investment. This leaves us with three potential futures for Africa: importer of green technology, meagre supplier of critical minerals or co-architects of a global energy transition. To ensure the continent takes Door Number 3, firstly, the continent needs to adopt an Africa-first policy, ridding itself of the passenger position to mineral-driven development. Secondly, a greater contribution must be made by African policymakers to minerals trade and traceability systems. Thirdly, countries - specifically Sub-Saharan Africa - should intensify their investment into green technology sectors for job creation, environmental protection and use of their own critical minerals. How can this be achieved? Critical mining licenses should include mandatory local manufacturing clauses. Long-term technology transfer with capable African-owned partners should be made part of signed agreements. Building local manufacturing capacity and linking critical minerals will address current developmental challenges, including Africa as a global competitor and rewrite resource extraction on our terms.