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Africa's Critical Minerals in the US-China Competition

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Africa's Critical Minerals in the US-China Competition

The competition for Africa's critical minerals is entering a new phase. China has spent decades consolidating its position in the African mineral supply chain, particularly for copper, cobalt, lithium, and zinc. Today, China controls 80% of Africa's mineral output. In response, the United States is accelerating efforts to secure access to these resources and reduce its dependence on Chinese-controlled supply chains through initiatives like [Project Vault](#), a \$12 billion fund aimed at acquiring critical minerals for American markets.

This competition now spans the entire mineral supply chain, from extraction and processing to financing, trading, and infrastructure used to transport minerals from Africa to global markets. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China has built roads, railroads, and power grids that connect Africa's critical minerals to international buyers. China processes nearly 70% of critical minerals, limiting exports to rivals and prioritizing its domestic industries, such as solar panels and electric vehicle batteries, sectors in which it leads global production. In contrast, the US is working to build alternative supply chains through government partnerships, development finance, and new trade corridors like the Lobito Corridor.

Since 2000, China has invested over [\\$24 billion](#) in its African mineral strategy, acquiring mines, constructing processing plants, and building supporting infrastructure. Its loans to African countries often come with fewer conditions than those from Western nations, granting China significant influence over political decisions. However, if a country defaults on its loan repayment, China has the right to take over some of the country's natural resources, leading to concerns over debt-trap diplomacy.

China enjoys a significant advantage in Africa's mining sector. It has secured lithium mines in Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Mali, as well as copper and cobalt mines in Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. China continues to expand its reach, investing in new lithium projects and processing plants, particularly in Nigeria and Zambia. In Zambia, the government even accepts mining royalty payments in Chinese Yuan, illustrating the depth of China's integration into these economies. China's advantage stems from its mineral ownership, vast deployable capital, processing capabilities, and willingness to take risks in markets other countries deem too volatile. This risk tolerance has allowed [China](#) to operate where traditional lenders hesitate.

China also serves as a primary market for African minerals. For lithium alone, it processes 70% of the global supply and manufactures 80% of lithium-ion batteries, securing the raw materials needed for its electric vehicle and battery industries. By combining mineral ownership, capital, and the ability to rapidly build infrastructure such as power and roads, China presents itself as a holistic partner for African countries.

Moreover, China has adapted to shifting policies in Africa. As governments move toward resource nationalism and ban the export of raw minerals, such as Zimbabwe's 2026 suspension of raw lithium concentrate exports, China has invested in local processing capacity to maintain access. Countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, and Zambia are pushing for more local processing and Chinese companies have responded by building additional plants.



Despite China's dominance, many African governments are seeking to diversify investment sources due to concerns over poor environmental practices and limited local employment opportunities. Incidents of water pollution in Zambia and Ghana, as well as suspicions of underreported mineral exports, have fueled these concerns. Chinese companies often bring in their own workforce, which limits local capacity-building. As a result, other countries, including the United States and countries of the Gulf, are increasingly being considered as alternative sources of finance and investment for Africa's critical minerals sector.

The US Builds an Alternative Supply Chain

The United States is reshaping its mineral supply chain strategy to reduce its dependence on China. This begins with high-level government engagement to secure access to critical minerals, creating the conditions for private sector investment and operation. For example, after brokering a peace agreement between Rwanda and the DRC in December 2025, President Trump announced a minerals-for-security partnership that opened the country's copper, cobalt, lithium, and gold sectors to greater [Western access](#) and investment. The agreement established government-to-government relationships, which have since been followed by private investment and offtake arrangements to secure physical mineral supply. The US is therefore seeking greater influence across the supply chain, from extraction and processing to the eventual use of these minerals by US defense, energy, and industrial sectors.

International partnerships are central to US mineral security. The Trump administration has anchored its strategy in bilateral agreements and investment deals, signing more than 160 agreements worth \$40 billion since January 2025, alongside bilateral agreements with 11 countries at the State Department's Critical Minerals Ministerial. These agreements provide entry points for US companies and investors, laying out the groundwork for private investment to follow.

The DRC shows how this government-to-government framework is translating into private investment. A [DRC-US Task Force](#) now oversees implementation of the partnership, while US-backed [Virtus Minerals](#) acquired the Chemaf assets and is developing two major mines and processing plants in Lubumbashi and Mutushi for US and allied buyers. The US Development Finance Corporation (DFC) also partnered with [Orion Resources](#) and Abu Dhabi's ADQ to create a \$1.8 billion consortium, enabling Orion to purchase a 40% stake in Glencore's Mutanda Mining and Kamoto Copper Company. The focus on producing assets allows the US to secure mineral supply more quickly than developing new mines from exploration.

Commodity traders are another important part of this strategy. In the DRC, Gécamines has committed to market up to 500,000 tonnes of copper to US buyers through its trading partnership with Mercuria, sourced from its stakes in major operations including Kamoto Copper Company and Chinese-owned Tenke Fungurume Mining. Mercuria is also working with Gécamines and Ivanhoe Mines to direct zinc concentrate from the Kipushi Mine towards the US under [Project Vault](#). These arrangements demonstrate how the US can use its relationship with the Congolese state and commodity traders to secure existing production, including minerals from Chinese-controlled assets, without having to own the mines itself.



Project Vault further illustrates the public-private model. Announced in February 2026, the [\\$12 billion](#) initiative created a strategic critical-minerals reserve for US industry, backed by EXIM financing and private capital. The project led to the formation of VaultCo, an independent company tasked with procurement and stockpiling. Glencore and Mercuria, its first participants, committed a combined \$1 billion to procure and stockpile minerals, using their existing global sourcing, financing, and logistics networks.

The DRC and Project Vault demonstrate how the US strategy depends on the private sector for execution. Government engagement establishes access, while institutions such as DFC and EXIM provide financing and help reduce investment risk. Mining companies and investors acquire and develop assets, while commodity traders secure offtakes and move physical minerals into US supply chains.

The same model is now being applied in Nigeria. In September 2026, the [US and Nigeria](#) signed a comprehensive minerals MOU spanning exploration, mining, processing, refining, and value addition. The agreement comes as Washington seeks to diversify its supply chains amid China's \$1.3 billion investment in Nigerian lithium processing. The scope of the agreement shows that US competition with China is moving across the mineral value chain, from securing resources in the ground to building the processing and refining capacity around them.

However, securing mineral production is only one part of building an alternative supply chain. For landlocked producers such as the DRC and Zambia, how those minerals reach international markets is equally important.

Lobito and TAZARA: The Competition Moves to Infrastructure

[The Lobito Corridor](#) is central to the emerging US strategy. Supported by the US, European partners and the private sector, the corridor is intended to connect the DRC and Zambia's Copperbelt westwards through Angola to the Atlantic Ocean. The US Development Finance Corporation (DFC) has committed approximately \$800 million, while the Lobito Atlantic Railway is operated by a consortium comprising Trafigura, Mota-Engil, and Vecturis. The Angolan section has already been rehabilitated, although the railway connection into Zambia still needs to be built.

Lobito could provide an important alternative to the routes currently used by Copperbelt producers. Minerals from the DRC and Zambia traditionally move through ports including Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, Durban in South Africa, and Beira in Mozambique. According to current estimates, transporting minerals from Kolwezi to Dar es Salaam can take around 35 days, compared with approximately 11 days to Lobito once the corridor is fully operational. Its commercial success will therefore depend on whether it can offer mining companies a competitive combination of cost, capacity, reliability, and transit time.

China, meanwhile, is strengthening the existing eastward route. The TAZARA railway connects Zambia to the Port of Dar es Salaam, providing Copperbelt producers with access to the Indian Ocean and onward shipping to Asian markets. China has committed approximately \$1.4 billion under a 30-year concession to rehabilitate and operate the railway, while Zambia and Tanzania retain ownership. The investment will increase the capacity and efficiency of an established route



that already provides Chinese mining companies and other Copperbelt producers with relatively direct access to Asian processing facilities and markets.

The two corridors therefore reflect a wider competition over the infrastructure surrounding Africa's mineral supply chains. Lobito creates a westward route to the Atlantic backed by the US and its partners, while the rehabilitation of TAZARA strengthens the existing eastward connection to the Indian Ocean. Both projects also have wider ambitions to stimulate regional trade and industrial development along their routes.

Lobito consequently fills an important gap in the emerging US mineral strategy, as the corridor provides the infrastructure needed to move that production towards American markets and into a supply chain less dependent on China.

Africa's Leverage

This competition also creates an opportunity for African governments pursuing greater resource nationalization. Many want to capture more value from their mineral resources through local processing, job creation, and skills development, but face significant constraints. Limited access to finance, inadequate transport infrastructure, and unreliable energy supply make it difficult to build the processing capacity required to move up the value chain.

Competition between the US and China gives African governments greater leverage to address these gaps. China has long combined mining investment with infrastructure and processing, while the US is now pushing aggressively to secure a larger position in Africa's mineral sector. African governments can use this competition to negotiate for investment in the infrastructure, energy, and processing capacity needed to support their own development.

Where Do the Gulf States Fit?

The Gulf states are increasingly active players in the race for Africa's critical minerals. The United States' approach to building new supply chains creates opportunities for collaboration with international partners. Gulf countries, with their substantial financial resources and rising interest in African minerals, are well-positioned to fill this role. Recent investments underscore this trend: the Qatar Investment Authority has committed \$500 million to Ivanhoe Mines and \$180 million to TechMet, while Abu Dhabi's ADQ has joined DFC and Orion Resources in a \$1.8 billion consortium pursuing major copper and cobalt assets.

Saudi Arabia appears set to follow suit. The Kingdom has announced plans to invest up to \$15 billion in global mining, established Manara Minerals to pursue projects abroad, and developed partnerships with African governments. The Gulf states offer more than just funding; their earlier investments in African ports, logistics, mining operations, processing facilities, and workforce development give them a strong foundation to participate in the mineral supply chains.

The Gulf states therefore do not need to compete directly with either Washington or Beijing. Their opportunity lies in using their capital, existing relationships, and growing mining ambitions to become strategic partners within the new supply chains being built around Africa's mineral.

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