

Strategic Perspectives on Minerals Chessboard—Strategic Moves: The Real Resource War?

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Introduction

The mineral chessboard is shifting power to regions rich in lithium, cobalt, and rare earths. The world is in age of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Electronic Vehicles (EV), and the players, who control the board, position themselves in their own squares.

“In the art of statecraft, minerals are the silent weapons—empires rise not by conquest, but by control of the earth beneath”

The critical minerals agreement establishes structured partnerships between Nations to secure reliable access to advance in technology, defence, and clean energy. The power of control of the Future significantly shifts from defence, GDP to minerals. This is the shift of the powers beneath the ground. Rare Earth and critical minerals will be more than bargaining chips.

Understanding the Regional Powers

Who holds the pieces?

- China sits at the centre, controlling nearly 70 per cent of the world's mining and 90 per cent of refining capacity.¹
- Russia is leveraging uranium and rare earth partnerships to maintain influence.
- The United States (US) is countering with minerals alliances (US-Australia Critical Minerals Pacts, India- Argentina lithium MoU, etc).
- Africa is a resource for Security Diplomacy. It is a growing phenomenon of a resource for security deals, minerals-rich nations engaging with foreign security-military actors in exchange for access to resources. Minerals are no longer just commodities, but nodes of influence and security alignments. India is expanding lithium exploration in Jammu and Kashmir and Rajasthan, Quad Coordination, and strategic partnerships with Africa and Australia.²

Understanding the squares of the Chess

Where is the game played? In geopolitics, understanding the geographies and why they matter uncovers the strategic moves. Minerals now drive AI, EV, defence and renewable industries. Every chip, basically, starts in a mine. Each region rich in minerals is a square; controlling these squares means access, influence, and leverage over critical resources.

The ‘Pieces’ are the stakeholders, like local companies and investors, and even start-ups. The entire ecosystem of the industry comprises production to mining, and processing to create dominance and dependence of others upon themselves.

Afghanistan's Mineral Potential

Shifting focus to Afghanistan, the country is believed to possess vast mineral reserves, including

significant deposits of rare earth elements. U.S. agencies estimate these resources to be worth upwards of \$1 trillion, with some referring to Afghanistan as the 'Saudi Arabia of lithium'.

However, the extraction and development of these resources face numerous challenges. Political instability, lack of infrastructure, and security concerns have hindered progress. Additionally, the Taliban's control over the region raises questions about governance and the equitable distribution of any potential revenues.

China's Strategic Interests in Afghanistan

China has shown interest in Afghanistan's mineral wealth, seeking to secure access to these resources. In recent years, Chinese companies have entered into agreements to explore and develop mining projects in Afghanistan. This strategic move aligns with China's broader Belt and Road Initiative, aiming to enhance connectivity and trade across Asia.

However, the geopolitical dynamics are complex. While China seeks to tap into Afghanistan's resources, it must navigate the delicate balance of international relations, particularly with neighbouring countries and global powers that have vested interests in the region. Distinguishing Rare Earth Elements, Metals, and Minerals. In resource strategy, the words minerals, metals, and rare earth elements (REEs) are often used interchangeably. Yet, the layers of distinction are of strategic significance in the global supply chain.

Rare Earth Elements (REEs). These are a group of 17 chemical elements found in the Earth's crust. Despite their name, they are relatively abundant but are rarely found in economically exploitable concentrations. They are crucial in the production of high-tech devices, magnets, and batteries. Examples include neodymium, dysprosium, terbium, europium. The control of the same determines who dominates advanced manufacturing, clean tech, and next-generation warfare. Controlling 60-70 per cent of the production and over 85 per cent of processing capacity makes it the undisputed queen of the mineral chessboard.

Metals. These are elements that are typically hard, shiny, malleable, and good conductors of electricity and heat. Examples include iron, copper, and aluminium. While some rare earth elements are metals, not all metals are rare earth elements. Examples include Copper, Aluminium, Zinc, Nickel, and Gold. Metals form the backbone of industry—the infrastructure, machinery, and defence production capabilities of a nation.

Minerals. These are naturally occurring inorganic solids with a definite chemical composition and crystalline structure. Minerals are the raw materials from which metals and rare earth elements are extracted. Examples include Iron ore, Bauxite, Copper ore, limestone, quartz, coal, and monazite sands. They feed industries from construction to electronics.

Understanding these distinctions is vital as nations strategize to secure their supply chains for these critical resources. The distinction gives an in-depth understanding and clarity for policy clarity, supply chain security, innovation, and supply chain security.

Why Supply Chains Matter?

The choice of the Beijing-owned China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation to negotiate a concession to operate the Tanzania-Zambia Railway line gives a layered analysis of the criticality of the supply chains.³ In Oct 2025, China announced expanded export controls on rare earth elements, a move that has sent ripples through global markets. These controls now encompass 12 of the 17 rare earth elements, including critical ones like europium, holmium, and ytterbium. Notably, these restrictions require foreign entities to obtain export licenses for products containing

even trace amounts of these elements, effective from 01 Dec 2025.

The US, for instance, has expressed concerns that these restrictions could disrupt defence supply chains and hinder technological advancements. In response, the Washington is exploring alternative sources and increasing investments in domestic mining and processing capabilities. The supply chain needs to be disrupted and diversified. It's difficult for the US and Europe to compete on manufacturing relative to the cost of labour, labour conditions, governance, and safety regulations, but it's nearly impossible if their supply chains are dependent on a single country.

Trade restrictions and political instability lead to single-country supply risk, and these vulnerabilities lead to price volatility. The supply chain is also vulnerable when a few countries dominate the extraction and processing of critical minerals like cobalt, nickel, and lithium.

Levers to Strengthen Supply Chain

What are the major diplomatic items as levers to the supply chain?

- Strategic Partnerships
- Source Diversification
- Developing domestic refining capacity
- Strategic reserves to reduce stock vulnerability
- Recycling, which is the most underused lever that requires global policy support
- Good Governance – A variable for sustainable global business.
- Trade Policy and Multilateral Coordination.

Strategic Deals- the New Diplomatic Currency

In mineral geopolitics, minerals represent technological trust and strategic autonomy.

- Lithium and Cobalt- this controls EV and Battery Value Chains.
- Rare Earths- Dominance in defence, semiconductors and green tech.
- Copper and Nickel- Industrial and Infrastructure sovereignty.

So, the logic of a mineral-based deal or partnership is not for mere exports, but has a future technological relevance.

Major Strategic Deals in the Critical Minerals domain

- Pakistan-US Strategic Metals Agreement (2025)
- Australia-US Critical Minerals Framework
- Saudi Arabia-India Critical Minerals Partnerships.

Deal	Value	Strategic Mineral Focus	Key Strategic Feature
Pakistan-US	US\$500 million	Antimony, gold, copper, and rare earths	Refinery built export security ties

Australia-US	US\$8.5 billion pipeline, US\$1 billion immediate	Gallium+ rare earths + processing	Counter China. Processing capacity focus.
Saudi Arabia-India	Large resources (US\$2.5 trillion in Saudi).	Lithium, copper, and rare earths.	Diversification upstream value chain, new geographic axis.

India's Position on the Mineral Chessboard

With the National Critical Minerals Mission (NCMM) launched in 2024 India has acknowledged that mineral security is not a resource is it's a strategic and a sovereignty issue which is critical. India is geologically rich in bauxite, rare earth oxides, graphite, and titanium. These assets are yet to be integrated into the global supply chain.

India, thus, occupies a 'Middle Power' in the mineral chessboard. It is influential but not dominant. A dependent consumer is not a loud voice in making the next move on the chessboard of Mineral War. The strategic inflection in India's resource diplomacy is evident, pushing dependency from Dependency to self-reliance.

- By setting up domestic refining clusters under KABIL, India moves to capture the high-value segment of the mineral ecosystem, which involves refining, processing, and technological conversion.
- India has also secured upstream access in Australia and downstream processing capacity within India. This ensures Strategic Hedging with Australia's dual advantage in the India- Australia Critical Minerals Investment Partnerships.

India should leverage the partnerships to attract ESG-compliant investments to achieve a competitive advantage on the chessboard. India should also prioritise Transfer of Technology and Research and Development partnerships with Japan and the US for refining technologies.

The author here would like to recall the Ancient Wisdom of India:

The *Arthashastra* composed by Kautilya in the 4th century BCE, is a sophisticated and detailed treatise on statecraft. Books II and V focus about Mines and Commerce and Taxes.

The ruler/ Leader shall maintain control over mines and industries, for from them comes the wealth of the state. By managing these resources directly, the ruler/ Leader need not oppress their subjects with heavy taxes, and the treasury remains prosperous, securing the strength of the land or the Nation.

India must move from a buyer to a proactive architect in the global mineral order. Because whoever controls the flow of minerals controls the tempo of industrialization and the narrative of power.

Endnotes

¹ Suranjana Tewari, China controls the rare earths the world buys - can Trump's new deals change that?, *BBC*, 27 Oct 2025, accessed 03 Nov 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj6ny2S4j0r3o>

² Amandine Gnanguènon and Marius Kretzschmar, From minerals to influence: Resource-for-security deals reshaping power dynamics in Africa, *Africa Policy Research Institute*, 29 Sep 2025, accessed on 03 Nov 2025, <https://afripoli.org/from-minerals-to-influence-resource-for-security-deals-reshaping-power-dynamics-in-africa#:~:text=Africa's%20vast%20natural%20resources%20have,for%20long%2Dterm%20resource%20access.>

³ Kang-Chun Cheng, The Tanzania-Zambia Railway Tracks the History of the Cold War, *Pulitzer Center*, 19 Jun 2025, accessed 03 Nov 2025, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/tanzania-zambia-railway-tracks-history-cold-war#:~:text=Western%20powers%20declared%20the%20project,domestic%20poverty%20and%20food%20insecurity.>

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Article uploaded on 04-11-2025

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