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Critical Minerals in the Crosshairs of US–China Rivalry: Africa's Strategic Choices for Sustainable Development

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1. Africa's centrality to global critical minerals

Africa's importance in global critical mineral supply chains is grounded in measurable production shares, significant reserve bases, and the concentration of minerals essential to the energy transition, digital technologies, and defence industries. Governments in advanced economies have increasingly formalised "critical minerals" strategies that directly affect Africa's trade and investment landscape. For example, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) published a 2022 list of 50 minerals deemed critical to U.S. national security and economic stability (USGS, 2022). Many of these minerals are produced in significant quantities across African jurisdictions, underscoring the continent's systemic relevance to global industrial restructuring.

1.1 Concentrated production and strategic leverage

Cobalt – The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)
The DRC represents the most striking example of global supply concentration. According to the USGS Mineral Commodity Summary (2025), Congo (Kinshasa) accounted for approximately 76per cent of global cobalt mine production in 2024 (USGS, 2025a). Cobalt is a core component in lithium-ion batteries used in electric vehicles (EVs), stationary storage systems, and digital devices. The degree of concentration means that regulatory, fiscal, or political decisions in the DRC have immediate global price and supply implications.

Bauxite – Guinea
Guinea has emerged as one of the world's leading bauxite producers. USGS estimates indicate Guinea produced approximately 130 million metric tonnes of bauxite in 2024 and holds an estimated 7.4 billion tonnes in reserves (USGS, 2025b). Bauxite is the primary raw material for aluminium production, which is indispensable for energy infrastructure, transportation, and defence manufacturing. Guinea's position, therefore, extends beyond commodity exports into strategic industrial supply chains.

Platinum-Group Metals – South Africa
South Africa remains the dominant global producer of platinum-group metals (PGMs). USGS data report that South Africa produced roughly 120,000 kilograms of platinum and 72,000 kilograms of palladium in 2024, holding the majority of global PGM reserves (USGS, 2025c). PGMs are critical for catalytic converters, hydrogen fuel cells, and electrolysis technologies central to emerging green hydrogen economies. This gives South Africa enduring structural significance in both legacy and emerging energy systems.

Copper – The Central African Copperbelt
Copper is fundamental to electrification, renewable energy systems, and grid expansion. The African Development Bank (AfDB) reports that the DRC and Zambia together account for approximately 15per cent of global copper production (AfDB, 2021). Given projected increases in electricity infrastructure investment and EV penetration, copper demand is expected to remain structurally strong. The Copperbelt's strategic importance has thus intensified amid supply-chain diversification efforts.

Graphite – Mozambique and Madagascar
Natural graphite is essential for lithium-ion battery anodes. The AfDB estimates that Africa accounts for roughly 10per cent of global graphite production, with Mozambique and Madagascar as key suppliers (AfDB, 2021a). As battery manufacturing expands globally, graphite supply diversification has become a strategic objective for industrial economies.

Uranium – Namibia
Namibia is among the world's leading uranium producers. The World Nuclear Association reports that Namibia accounted for approximately 12per cent of global uranium mine output in 2024 (World Nuclear Association, 2024). Uranium's role in low-carbon baseload electricity generation reinforces Namibia's relevance within global energy security debates.

1.2 Rising demand and structural transformation

Africa's mineral centrality is amplified by rapidly growing demand linked to decarbonisation and digitalisation. The International Energy Agency (IEA) reports that lithium demand increased by nearly 30per cent in 2024, while demand for cobalt, nickel, graphite, and rare earth elements grew between 6–8per cent, driven primarily by electric mobility and renewable energy deployment (IEA, 2025). This demand trajectory increases the geopolitical and economic premium placed on stable supply partnerships with mineral-producing countries.

As supply diversification becomes a strategic priority in the United States, the European Union, and Japan, Africa's role as a resource base has moved from peripheral to central in industrial policy planning.

1.3 From geological centrality to developmental transformation

Despite upstream dominance in several minerals, Africa captures a limited share of downstream value. Much of the refining, processing, and advanced manufacturing linked to battery precursors, cathode and anode production, magnet manufacturing, and semiconductor fabrication occurs outside the continent. This structural asymmetry reinforces long-standing concerns about enclave production and commodity dependency.

The African Union's Africa Mining Vision (AMV) explicitly recognises this challenge, calling for the transformation of Africa's mineral endowments into broad-based industrial development through value addition, beneficiation, and regional integration (African Union, 2009). More recently, the African Union's Africa Green Minerals Strategy has reiterated the importance of leveraging critical minerals for green industrialisation and continental value chains (African Union, 2023).

1.4 Strategic implications

Africa's mineral centrality, therefore, carries dual implications. First, it provides negotiating leverage amid intensifying global competition for secure supply chains. Second, it heightens exposure to price volatility, external political pressures, and governance risks. The extent to which African states convert geological advantage into developmental gains will depend on institutional capacity, policy coherence, and the strategic alignment of mineral policy with continental frameworks such as the AMV and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

2. US–China competition for mineral supply chains

US–China competition over critical minerals is increasingly shaped by two structural realities: (i) China's entrenched dominance in processing and downstream manufacturing for several strategic minerals, and (ii) the United States' renewed use of trade and industrial-policy tools to reduce "single-point" vulnerabilities in supply chains. These dynamics are now intersecting directly with African mineral producers both through new partnership offers and through heightened geopolitical pressure around where minerals are refined, transformed, and ultimately embedded in high-value technologies.

2.1 China's structural advantage: processing depth and downstream control

China's competitive position is strongest downstream, where value, technological learning, and industrial leverage are most concentrated. In rare earths in particular, multiple credible sources underline the scale of Chinese processing and manufacturing dominance. Reuters has reported that China produces over 90per cent of the world's processed rare earths and rare earth magnets, highlighting Beijing's leverage at the stage that matters most for advanced manufacturing (Reuters, 2025). The International Energy Agency (IEA) also tracks this concentration through its datasets, including a chart on China's share in rare earth magnet production (IEA, 2025).

This downstream advantage shapes the nature of global bargaining: even where mining occurs outside China, many supply chains still depend on Chinese refining, chemical conversion, or component manufacturing. In practice, that means African exporters can face a market in which "choice" is constrained unless alternative processing capacity emerges at scale.

2.2 China's policy toolkit: trade incentives and strategic restrictions

Beijing's approach combines long-term commercial positioning with state-backed trade and investment signals. A major recent example is China's decision to expand preferential market access for African exports. Reuters reported that China will implement zero-tariff treatment for imports from 53 African countries with which it has diplomatic relations, beginning May 1, 2026 (Reuters, 2026). This is a significant geopolitical and commercial signal because it strengthens China's role as a destination market while reinforcing broader partnership narratives.

At the same time, China has increasingly demonstrated a willingness to apply export controls to protect strategic advantage or increase bargaining leverage. Reuters reported new and/or tightened rare-earth-related restrictions in 2025, explicitly framing the measures in terms of strategic leverage and the importance of rare earths for defence and advanced technologies (Reuters, 2025). The Council on Foreign Relations similarly notes Beijing's use of export controls affecting heavy rare-earth elements and highlights how these measures shape supply-chain risk perceptions among US and allied policymakers (CFR, 2026).

2.3 The US response: securitisation, tariffs, and industrial policy

The United States has increasingly framed critical minerals as an issue of national security and industrial resilience, not only trade competitiveness. A prominent illustration is the January 14, 2026, Presidential Proclamation on "Adjusting Imports of Processed Critical Minerals and Their Derivative Products", which explicitly references a Section 232 investigation into whether imports of processed critical minerals and derivative products threaten US national security (White House, 2026). The proclamation reflects how Section 232, originally a national-security trade authority, has evolved into a tool used to address perceived supply-chain vulnerability in strategic sectors (White House, 2026; U.S. Department of Commerce, n.d.).

Beyond tariffs and investigations, the United States is also using direct investment and demand guarantees to accelerate domestic capacity—especially in rare earth magnets, which are critical for defence platforms and clean-tech applications. In July 2025, Reuters reported a multibillion-dollar U.S. Department of Defence (DoD) deal with MP Materials, including a $400 million preferred equity investment and other measures aimed at building an end-to-end US rare earth magnet supply chain and reducing dependence on China (Reuters, 2025a). Associated reporting emphasised that the agreement includes long-term purchase commitments and price stabilisation features intended to reduce project risk and accelerate domestic manufacturing (AP News, 2025). These moves illustrate the US shift from relying primarily on market forces toward a more active, state-backed industrial strategy in minerals deemed essential to security and high-tech competitiveness.

2.4 Where Africa fits: from extraction hub to contested "value-chain partner"

As the US seeks alternatives to China-centric processing routes, Africa is increasingly framed not only as a source of raw minerals but also as a potential site for regional value chains—especially in battery-related minerals. The US State Department announced the signing of the US–DRC–Zambia Memorandum of Understanding aimed at strengthening an electric vehicle battery value chain, with an emphasis on cooperation that goes beyond raw export and towards value-chain development (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Analytical work from CSIS underscores that the MOU is intended to catalyse investment and coordination across extraction, processing, and related industrial activities while also serving US objectives to diversify and "de-risk" critical inputs for clean technologies (CSIS, 2023).

Infrastructure strategy has also become part of supply-chain competition. The Lobito Corridor has been promoted as a route linking the DRC and Zambia's mining regions to Angola's Atlantic coast, supporting mineral exports while potentially enabling broader regional trade and industrialisation (OECD, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2024; European Commission, n.d.). While different actors emphasise different priorities- logistics resilience, strategic diversification, and regional integration- the corridor's prominence reflects how mineral supply chains now shape diplomacy, development finance, and infrastructure planning (OECD, 2025; European Commission, n.d.).

2.5 Implications of rivalry for African producers: leverage amid volatility

For African states, US–China competition creates a mixed environment:

- Greater leverage to negotiate (because multiple partners are seeking secure access), but also
- Greater exposure to volatility and policy risk, including shifts in tariff regimes, export-control dynamics, and geopolitical conditionalities (White House, 2026; Reuters, 2025; Reuters, 2026).

In this context, the most consequential competition is not only over mining rights, but over where processing, precursor manufacturing, and component production will locate—since these stages determine jobs, technological capabilities, fiscal revenues, and the long-run development impact of mineral extraction.

3. African agency and strategic responses

African governments are not passive "sites" of extraction in US–China competition. Across the continent, states are deploying a range of policy and regulatory tools-some cooperative, some more assertive—to increase control over mineral rents, steer investment toward local value addition, and diversify external partners. These responses vary widely by political context, mineral profile, and institutional capacity, but several common patterns are now visible: (i) resource nationalism and contract renegotiation, (ii) export-management measures to stabilise markets and strengthen bargaining power, (iii) local processing and industrial policy initiatives, and (iv) regional and corridor-based strategies that seek to reposition Africa in higher-value segments of supply chains.

3.1 Resource nationalism, contract renegotiation, and fiscal assertion

A first strand of African agency is the move toward more assertive state positioning in the mining sector—through revised mining codes, increased state participation, contract reviews, and, in some cases, nationalisation. In the Sahel, Reuters reports that Burkina Faso plans to nationalise more industrial mines, expanding state control through its state mining company (SOPAMIB) and applying provisions in a revised mining code to increase domestic capture of mining revenues (Reuters, 2025). In Mali, Reuters reports the start of construction of a Russia-backed gold refinery near Bamako, framed by the authorities as part of efforts to increase domestic processing and state control over natural-resource revenues, alongside wider reforms that have unsettled some investors (Reuters, 2025a). In Niger, the Financial Times reports that the government announced it would nationalise the Somair uranium venture (previously majority-owned by Orano), in a move portrayed domestically as a sovereign response to perceived inequities and externally as part of a broader escalation in disputes with foreign operators (Financial Times, 2025). Commentators in Le Monde similarly describe this wave of "resource nationalism" in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso as involving renegotiations, nationalisations, and mining code reforms—often driven by acute fiscal pressures as well as sovereignty narratives (Le Monde, 2025).

In Central Africa, agency is also expressed through renegotiation and scrutiny of legacy "minerals-for-infrastructure" deals. The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) describes how disclosures linked to EITI reporting in the DRC contributed to renewed attention on the Sicomines agreement and its fiscal terms, supporting a renegotiation process framed around improving public value and revenues (EITI, 2024). While the motivations and outcomes differ across cases, these actions reflect a broader shift toward contesting older contractual arrangements and raising expectations around transparency, local benefits, and state participation.

3.2 Managing exports and market power: the DRC's cobalt quota regime

A second, more targeted form of agency involves export-management policies intended to stabilise markets and strengthen producer leverage. In the DRC, Reuters reports that the government introduced a cobalt export quota system replacing an earlier export ban—and set caps for the remainder of 2025 and for 2026–27, alongside enforcement measures including the possibility of permanent exclusion from the regime for quota violations (Reuters, 2025b). This is significant because cobalt is among the most geographically concentrated critical minerals, and the DRC's decisions can reshape global market balances and downstream planning.

From a policy perspective, quota regimes can serve multiple objectives: reducing price collapses associated with oversupply, increasing predictability for fiscal planning, and enhancing bargaining power in negotiations with downstream buyers and processors. However, the DRC case also illustrates implementation risks: quota transitions can create short-term disruptions if administrative systems and monitoring are not robust (Reuters, 2025b).

3.3 Industrial policy and local value addition: moving beyond raw exports

A third strand of African responses is the growing emphasis on domestic processing, beneficiation, and early-stage manufacturing. While implementation remains uneven, the direction is reinforced by both national strategies and continental frameworks. The African Union's Africa Mining Vision (AMV) explicitly calls for downstream linkages into beneficiation and manufacturing and for integrating mining into broader industrial development strategies (African Union, 2009).

More concretely, some governments are leveraging new geopolitical interests to advance value-chain ambitions. The U.S. State Department announced the signing of the US–DRC–Zambia memorandum of understanding aimed at strengthening an EV battery value chain, with cooperation intended to go beyond extraction and support value-chain development (U.S. Department of State, 2023). CSIS analysis underscores that the agreement is framed as a platform for investment and coordination across the chain, but notes that realising these objectives requires sustained policy alignment, infrastructure investment, and credible governance arrangements (CSIS, 2023).

Sahelian reforms likewise show that "value addition" is not limited to battery minerals: in Mali, the Reuters-reported gold refinery initiative is explicitly framed as a move toward processing domestically rather than exporting unrefined output, aiming to retain more economic value and improve traceability (Reuters, 2025a). Taken together, these examples point to a broader trend: African governments are increasingly contesting a purely upstream role and seeking to embed extraction into domestic industrial strategies —though success depends on power supply, transport logistics, finance, skills, and regulatory stability.

3.4 Regional integration and corridor strategies: repositioning Africa in supply chains

A fourth form of agency involves using regional integration frameworks and trade facilitation to strengthen Africa's negotiating position and support cross-border value chains. The African Union notes that the AfCFTA agreement entered into force on 30 May 2019, and trading under the AfCFTA regime commenced on 1 January 2021, providing a continental framework intended to lower barriers and build larger integrated markets (African Union, 2019; African Union, 2021). In critical minerals, this matters because processing hubs, specialised services, and supplier industries often require a regional scale to be commercially viable.

Infrastructure corridors have also become focal points for African-led and partner-supported diversification strategies. The European Commission's Global Gateway description of the Lobito Corridor frames it as a flagship project connecting the DRC, Zambia, and Angola to global markets, with components that include rail rehabilitation/extension, trade facilitation, and linkages to critical raw material value chains (European Commission, n.d.). An OECD background note similarly presents the corridor as a major rail and infrastructure project intended to diversify mineral transport routes, spur trade and industrialisation, and support regional integration (OECD, 2025). Reuters reports that the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation signed a $553 million loan to support upgrades to Angola's Benguela rail line—central to the Lobito Corridor—with the aim of improving logistics for copper and cobalt exports from Zambia and the DRC to the Atlantic (Reuters, 2025c). The Financial Times situates Lobito explicitly within geopolitical competition, portraying it as part of a broader Western push to strengthen critical mineral supply chains and expand influence through infrastructure and investment packages (Financial Times, 2024).

These corridor strategies illustrate how African agency can operate through route diversification (reducing dependence on single export corridors), regional bargaining (aligning producer and transit states), and industrial clustering (using logistics improvements to attract processing and manufacturing investments). They also raise governance and social risk considerations—such as land tenure, resettlement, and benefit-sharing—that become central to the political sustainability of these projects.

3.5 Balancing partners in a contested environment

Finally, many African states are navigating the rivalry by maintaining a degree of strategic non-alignment—seeking to avoid overdependence on either the US or China while extracting concrete benefits (finance, infrastructure, processing investment, technology transfer) from multiple partners. This balancing act is partly shaped by the current structure of ownership and influence in some mineral sectors. For example, CFR notes that Chinese actors retain extensive control over parts of the DRC's cobalt sector and supply chain relationships, reinforcing the practical constraints facing diversification strategies in the short term (CFR, 2025).

Overall, African agency is expanding, but the effectiveness of these strategies will depend on institutional capacity (contracting, monitoring, taxation), credibility with investors, and the extent to which policies are anchored in regional and continental frameworks rather than isolated national measures.

4. Risks and opportunities in strategic competition

African governments are not passive "sites" of extraction in US–China competition. Across the continent, states are deploying a range of policy and regulatory tools-some cooperative, some more assertive—to increase control over mineral rents, steer investment toward local value addition, and diversify external partners. These responses vary widely by political context, mineral profile, and institutional capacity, but several common patterns are now visible: (i) resource nationalism and contract renegotiation, (ii) export-management measures to stabilise markets and strengthen bargaining power, (iii) local processing and industrial policy initiatives, and (iv) regional and corridor-based strategies that seek to reposition Africa in higher-value segments of supply chains.

4.1 Key risks

Risk 1: Supply-chain concentration and geopolitical leverage

A core vulnerability is the concentration of refining and processing capacity in a small number of countries—especially China—creating a structural chokepoint between African extraction and global manufacturing. The International Energy Agency (IEA) finds that China is the dominant refiner for 19 of the 20 minerals it analyses, with an average market share of around 70per cent (IEA, 2025). For African exporters, this concentration can reduce bargaining power on pricing and offtake terms, heighten exposure to geopolitical shocks, and constrain options for "de-risking" unless alternative processing capacity is developed at scale (IEA, 2025).

Risk 2: Price volatility and revenue instability

Critical mineral markets have demonstrated sharp price swings that complicate fiscal planning and long-term industrial investment. The IEA reports that three-quarters of the strategic minerals it assesses have shown greater price volatility than oil, and half have been more volatile than natural gas (IEA, 2025). The cobalt market illustrates this clearly. Reuters documents a boom–bust dynamic in cobalt where production growth in the DRC outpaced demand, contributing to a surplus and a price slump to multi-year lows in early 2025, followed by sharp price increases linked to export controls and supply disruptions (Reuters, 2025; Reuters, 2025a). Such volatility can weaken domestic revenue predictability, intensify political contestation over rents, and deter downstream investment that requires stable input pricing.

Risk 3: Policy and regulatory uncertainty from trade measures and export controls

As critical minerals are framed as national-security assets, policy interventions—tariffs, trade investigations, export bans, quotas—can arrive abruptly and reshape market conditions. The January 2026 U.S. presidential proclamation on "Adjusting Imports of Processed Critical Minerals and Their Derivative Products" explicitly links processed critical minerals to a Section 232 national-security investigation framework (White House, 2026). On the producer side, DRC cobalt export management has had major downstream effects: Reuters reports that the DRC's export halt and subsequent quota system contributed to significant supply disruptions and price spikes, with uncertainty persisting due to additional export conditions and verification requirements (Reuters, 2025b; Reuters, 2025c). For African states, such measures may increase short-term leverage, but they also create reputational and investment risks if implementation is perceived as unpredictable.

Risk 4: By-product dependency and limited supply responsiveness

Many critical minerals are produced as by-products (for example, cobalt often alongside copper), which limits the ability of supply to respond quickly to price signals. The IEA estimates that around half of the minerals it assesses are produced as by-products, constraining flexibility when markets tighten or when policy interventions occur (IEA, 2025). For African producer countries, by-product dynamics can complicate domestic strategies aimed at stabilising supply or scaling production to meet industrial-policy objectives.

Risk 5: ESG, governance, and market-access constraints

Because many mineral deposits are located in complex governance environments, producer countries face rising scrutiny over environmental performance, labour conditions, security arrangements, and community impacts. The OECD's Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas sets out government-backed expectations for due diligence across mineral supply chains, shaping how firms manage risks and how buyers assess sourcing jurisdictions (OECD, 2016; OECD, 2025). More recently, OECD guidance highlights that significant reserves are located in contexts with perceived governance risks and limited infrastructure, factors that intensify responsible sourcing challenges (OECD, 2026). For African producers, weak governance can therefore translate into restricted market access, higher compliance costs, and reputational risks—especially as "responsible sourcing" becomes a procurement requirement in some downstream markets.

4.2 Key opportunities

Opportunity 1: Improved bargaining position and better fiscal/industrial terms

Heightened competition among major powers and firms can increase the negotiating space for African governments to pursue stronger fiscal terms, local content, and technology transfer—particularly when supply is concentrated, and demand is rising. The IEA notes strong demand growth trajectories for key energy minerals across scenarios, with rapid projected growth for lithium, graphite, nickel, cobalt, and rare earth elements through 2040 (IEA, 2025). This demand outlook can be used to justify long-term industrial strategies and negotiated commitments tied to domestic processing, skills development, and supplier upgrading-if supported by credible policy and infrastructure plans.

Opportunity 2: Leveraging "value addition" and industrial upgrading agendas

Continental frameworks provide an established basis for turning mineral wealth into broad-based development. The African Union's Africa Mining Vision explicitly calls for integrating mining into industrial development through beneficiation and value-chain linkages (African Union, 2009). The World Bank has similarly emphasised that with sound policies and shared infrastructure, resource-rich countries can convert minerals into jobs and long-run prosperity rather than remaining locked into raw exports (World Bank, 2025).

In practice, rivalry-related interest in "secure supply chains" can be leveraged to attract investments into processing, refining, precursor manufacturing, and associated services—provided that energy reliability, permitting, and governance systems are strengthened (World Bank, 2025).

Opportunity 3: New infrastructure finance and corridor-based diversification

Strategic supply-chain concerns are helping to mobilise infrastructure investments that can reduce transport bottlenecks and open alternative export routes. Reuters reports U.S. development finance support for upgrading Angola's Benguela railway (a key element of the Lobito Corridor) to strengthen mineral export logistics for Zambia and the DRC (Reuters, 2025d). Corridor approaches can also support regional integration and enable processing clusters by lowering trade costs and improving the reliability of inputs and exports—critical for moving beyond enclave extraction models (World Bank, 2025).

Opportunity 4: "Responsible minerals" as a route to premium markets and investment

As downstream buyers apply stricter sourcing rules, improvements in transparency, traceability, and ESG performance can become a competitiveness strategy, not merely a compliance burden. The OECD Due Diligence Guidance is widely used as a benchmark across the supply chain, from mine to end user, and alignment can reduce buyer risk perceptions and expand market access (OECD, 2016; OECD, 2025). In effect, stronger governance can help producer countries attract long-horizon investors and secure offtake agreements with firms that face reputational and regulatory exposure in consumer markets.

Opportunity 5: Climate-smart mining and access to technical assistance

Producer countries can also leverage global climate and sustainability agendas to access technical assistance and capacity building. The World Bank's Climate-Smart Mining Initiative explicitly aims to help resource-rich developing countries benefit from rising mineral demand while reducing the material and emissions footprint of supply chains, offering analytics and capacity-building support (World Bank, 2019). This can strengthen domestic capability to manage water use, tailings, biodiversity impacts, and decarbonisation of mining operations-areas that increasingly affect access to finance and long-term project viability (World Bank, 2019).

5. Policy recommendations: translating competition into long-term development gains

The intensifying competition between the United States and China over critical minerals does not automatically translate into developmental gains for African producers. Converting geological advantage into industrial transformation requires deliberate policy coordination at national, regional, and continental levels. Drawing on established continental frameworks and multilateral guidance, this section outlines policy directions grounded in verifiable international evidence and institutional recommendations.

5.1 Strengthening mineral governance and fiscal regimes

A first priority is strengthening governance systems that ensure mineral wealth contributes to sustainable development. The African Union's Africa Mining Vision (AMV) calls for transparent licensing systems, fair fiscal regimes, contract disclosure, and alignment between mining policy and broader development strategies (African Union, 2009). The AMV explicitly recognises that mineral extraction must move beyond enclave models toward inclusive, development-oriented governance.

Complementing this, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) provides a global standard for revenue transparency, contract disclosure, and beneficial ownership reporting. As of 2024, several African mineral-producing countries. including the DRC, Zambia, Ghana, and Nigeria—are implementing EITI standards to enhance accountability and investor confidence (EITI, 2024). Evidence suggests that transparent fiscal regimes can reduce investor uncertainty while strengthening domestic oversight capacity.

The OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas further reinforces the importance of traceability, risk assessment, and responsible sourcing (OECD, 2016). Aligning domestic regulatory frameworks with internationally recognised due diligence standards can expand market access, particularly as downstream buyers increasingly apply ESG screening criteria.

5.2 Promoting domestic value addition and industrial upgrading

A central objective of African mineral strategies is to move beyond raw exports toward processing and industrial linkages. The Africa Mining Vision explicitly calls for "beneficiation and value addition" to integrate mining into industrial development and regional value chains (African Union, 2009).

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which entered into force in 2019 and commenced trading in 2021, provides a continental framework to support cross-border industrial integration and market scale (African Union, 2019; African Union, 2021).

By lowering tariff barriers and harmonising trade rules, AfCFTA can facilitate the emergence of regional mineral processing hubs rather than fragmented national efforts.

The World Bank emphasises that resource-rich developing countries can convert mineral wealth into jobs and economic diversification when policies promote infrastructure development, human capital investment, and downstream industrial participation (World Bank, 2025). In the context of rising global demand for battery and renewable-energy inputs, targeted industrial policies—supported by stable energy supply and regulatory clarity can position African states to capture higher-value segments of the supply chain.

5.3 Leveraging strategic partnerships and triangular cooperation

Strategic competition creates opportunities for diversified partnerships beyond binary alignments. The U.S.–DRC–Zambia Memorandum of Understanding on Electric Vehicle Battery Value Chains, announced by the U.S. Department of State in 2023, illustrates how partnerships can explicitly incorporate value-chain development objectives (U.S. Department of State, 2023). While implementation challenges remain, the framework demonstrates a shift toward recognising African countries as industrial partners rather than solely raw material suppliers.

Similarly, the European Union's Global Gateway initiative includes the Lobito Corridor as a flagship infrastructure project intended to enhance regional integration and facilitate mineral exports while potentially supporting value-chain development (European Commission, n.d.). Infrastructure partnerships of this kind can reduce transport bottlenecks, diversify export routes, and strengthen bargaining positions.

Multilateral development institutions also play a facilitative role. The World Bank's Climate-Smart Mining Initiative supports resource-rich countries in aligning mineral development with environmental sustainability and climate objectives, providing analytical and technical support to strengthen governance and reduce environmental footprints (World Bank, 2019). Triangular cooperation models combining African governments, development finance institutions, and private-sector investors can help mitigate risk while supporting industrial capacity building.

5.4 Enhancing regional coordination and collective bargaining

Regional coordination can increase African leverage in negotiations with external powers. The African Union's Africa Mining Vision stresses the importance of harmonised mining policies and regional collaboration to prevent "race-to-the-bottom" competition among neighbouring states (African Union, 2009).

Under AfCFTA, coordinated standards, customs procedures, and trade facilitation measures can reduce transaction costs and support integrated mineral value chains across borders (African Union, 2021). Regional infrastructure corridors—such as those supported under Global Gateway and other initiatives—can serve not only as export channels but also as foundations for industrial clustering (European Commission, n.d.).

The OECD notes that responsible mineral supply chains require coordination among producer states to ensure traceability, governance coherence, and credible enforcement (OECD, 2016). Collective approaches can strengthen negotiating capacity and reduce asymmetries in bilateral arrangements with major powers.

5.5 Investing in institutional capacity and long-term planning

Finally, long-term gains from critical minerals depend on institutional resilience. The World Bank underscores that converting extractive revenues into sustained development outcomes requires strong public financial management systems, diversified economic planning, and investment in education and skills (World Bank, 2025).

The Africa Mining Vision similarly highlights capacity building in geological data management, contract negotiation, and fiscal administration as prerequisites for sustainable mineral governance (African Union, 2009). Without institutional strengthening, increased geopolitical competition risks amplifying volatility rather than enabling structural transformation.

Strategic competition between the United States and China has elevated Africa's critical mineral endowments to the centre of global industrial policy. Yet rivalry alone does not guarantee developmental dividends. The decisive variable lies in domestic and regional policy choices—particularly the strength of governance frameworks, the credibility of industrial strategies, and the ability to diversify partnerships while maintaining regulatory stability.

Continental frameworks such as the Africa Mining Vision and AfCFTA provide a foundation for coordinated responses. When combined with responsible supply-chain standards, targeted industrial investment, and multilateral cooperation, these tools can help ensure that Africa's mineral wealth supports inclusive growth rather than reinforcing external dependency.

6. Concluding Remarks

Africa's critical mineral endowments have moved from being a peripheral feature of global commodity markets to a central pillar of industrial, climate, and national security strategies. The intensifying rivalry between the United States and China has reinforced this shift, elevating minerals such as cobalt, copper, platinum-group metals, graphite, and rare earth elements into instruments of geopolitical influence. Yet while competition among major powers has heightened Africa's strategic visibility, it does not in itself guarantee structural transformation or equitable development outcomes.

The evidence suggests that supply-chain concentration in refining and processing, combined with price volatility and growing securitisation of trade, creates both leverage and exposure for African producers. Where governance systems are strong, transparency mechanisms are institutionalised, and industrial strategies are coherent, competition can translate into improved fiscal terms, expanded processing capacity, and deeper integration into global value chains. Where institutions remain fragile or policy signals are inconsistent, rivalry risks reinforcing enclave extraction, revenue instability, and geopolitical dependency.

Continental frameworks such as the Africa Mining Vision and AfCFTA provide strategic anchors for navigating this landscape. They articulate a long-standing vision: that mineral resources should underpin diversified industrialisation, regional integration, and inclusive growth rather than perpetuate raw-material dependency. In the current geopolitical context, these frameworks acquire renewed relevance. They offer a platform through which African states can coordinate regulatory standards, strengthen bargaining power, and align mineral policy with broader economic transformation agendas.

Looking ahead, the central policy question is not whether Africa will remain important to global critical mineral supply chains—it already is. The question is whether African governments can convert strategic importance into sustained economic sovereignty. Achieving this outcome requires transparent contract regimes, stable regulatory environments, investment in infrastructure and human capital, and credible commitments to responsible environmental and social standards.

If effectively managed, the present moment of strategic competition may represent a window of opportunity: a chance to renegotiate Africa's position within global production networks and to embed mineral development within long-term structural transformation. If mismanaged, however, the same dynamics could deepen volatility and external dependency. The stakes extend beyond commodity markets; they concern the trajectory of African industrialisation and the future configuration of global supply chains in an era defined by energy transition and technological change.

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