

# GLOBAL CRISIS WATCH

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**THE NEW GEOPOLITICS  
OF CRITICAL MINERALS**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The session examined the escalating geopolitical competition surrounding rare earth elements and critical minerals—resources fundamental to clean energy, defence and advanced technology. The discussions underscored China’s dominance in mining and refining, including its recent regulatory tightening over exports, that has reignited trade tensions with the United States.

Attention was drawn to China’s extensive investment through the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly in Africa, where concerns persist over environmental degradation, labour practices, as well as national sovereignty. Meanwhile, countries such as Australia are seeking to strengthen domestic supply chains to reduce reliance on Chinese processing capacity.

The session expanded on these dynamics, illustrating how the global race for critical minerals is reshaping power structures and challenging existing models of cooperation. As major powers compete for resource security, local populations in resource-rich regions face the dual pressures of opportunity and inequity.

Overall, the conversation reinforced that access to and governance of critical minerals represent more than an economic concern—they are central not only to the goal of achieving global stability and strategic resilience, but also to the evolving balance of power. Sustainable and transparent management of these resources will be essential to mitigating future conflict and ensuring a more secure global order.



The intensifying competition for critical minerals has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary geopolitics, reshaping global power dynamics across Africa, Asia and beyond. As nations strive to secure the resources essential for different purposes, such as clean energy, defence and advanced technologies. A new era of resource diplomacy is taking shape—characterised by strategic rivalries and the growing influence of both state and non-state actors.

China's Announcement No. 62 exemplifies this strategic shift. By introducing new controls over export routes and supply chains, Beijing has reignited trade tensions with the United States and the European Union. Although later clarifying that exports for 'civil purposes' would not require licensing, the ambiguity surrounding dual-use technologies has amplified uncertainty across global markets. These measures, scheduled to take effect on 8 November 2025, coincide with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum in South Korea, where Presidents Xi and Trump are expected to meet—an event that could shape the next phase of global trade relations.

Beyond trade policy, the discussion also examined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its extensive investments across Central Africa, which have granted Beijing unparalleled access to critical mineral reserves. These investments, while driving infrastructure development, have also raised significant concerns regarding environmental degradation, weak labour protections, as well as increasing debt dependency. For many partner nations, defaulting on Chinese loans has meant the effective loss of sovereignty over vital national assets and infrastructure.

At the same time, other nations—most notably Australia—are working to develop their own reserves and processing capabilities to reduce dependency and reinforce strategic autonomy. This evolving landscape underscores how control over extraction and trade of critical minerals has become a decisive factor in shaping both technological advancement and international alignments.

This report explored these dynamics in depth, addressing the intersections between resource security, political instability and ethical responsibility within the global mineral supply chain. In addition, the contributors examined how governments, private enterprises and local communities navigate competing interests in increasingly unstable regions—from Africa's coups and youth-led movements, to the West's recalibration in response to China's dominance.

Finally, the conversation concluded that the global dependence on critical minerals transcends economics—it is inherently geopolitical and humanitarian. More precisely, issues of exploitation, sovereignty and sustainability are now central to questions about right governance and moral responsibility. The insights drawn from this report should serve to highlight both the growing risks and the emerging opportunities for a more equitable and sustainable approach to managing the world's most strategic resources.

# KEY MESSAGES

**Rare earths and critical minerals** are now central to global power dynamics, influencing energy transitions, defence systems and technological developments.

**China controls ~90%** of global refining capacity and continues to leverage long-term strategy and infrastructure investment to maintain supply chain control.

**The West's past outsourcing** of refining and manufacturing has led to strategic dependency, prompting calls for domestic capability rebuilding and supply chain resilience.

**Mining operations**—especially in Africa and Latin America—pose severe risks to various ecosystems, food security and community welfare. Unregulated artisanal mining is linked to organised crime and exploitation.

Weak oversight and corruption in resource-rich regions perpetuate inequality and instability. The **'resource curse'** remains a persistent challenge, especially in countries like the DRC, Sudan and South Sudan.

**Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Nigeria** are exploring national ownership and local capacity-building to retain value and reduce external dependency.

**Western nations** are shifting from interventionism to cautious observation, reflecting **public fatigue and complex geopolitical consequences**.

As **Russia's influence** diminishes, U.S. and **Chinese investments in Africa's mineral sector** are reshaping regional power balances and economic futures.

The **race for resources** is increasingly defined by **economic manoeuvring** rather than military intervention, with access and investment replacing territorial control.

An **emphasis on reduce, replace, reuse and reallocate strategies** strives to mitigate environmental damage and reliance on traditional mining.

**Advances in materials science** are reducing rare earth content in critical technologies, while recycling older tech offers cleaner alternatives.

As terrestrial resources dwindle, **future extraction may extend to the moon or Mars**.

**Cross-sector collaboration is essential.**

Fragmented approaches to resource governance, environmental policy and supply chain ethics are no longer viable.

Effective interventions must balance **ethical commitments** with **local survival imperatives**, acknowledging the human drive behind resource conflicts.

The **upcoming COP30** will test whether environmental advocacy can adapt to geopolitical realities and drive meaningful change.

**Youth-led protests in Madagascar, Nepal and Bangladesh** reflect growing frustration with corruption, inequality and lack of opportunity. These movements are reshaping political orders and challenging entrenched elites.

External actors increasingly **manipulate youth unrest** to gain strategic advantage, turning grassroots movements into geopolitical battlegrounds.

# GLOBAL THEMES AND STRATEGIC SHIFTS

## GLOBAL POWER SHIFTS AND THE REALITY OF CRITICAL RAW MATERIALS

During the session, a candid examination of the geopolitical and economic realities was provided, underpinning the global rare earth and critical minerals market. It was noted that, despite their name, rare earth elements are not inherently scarce—the challenge lies in their complexity and cost of processing, which has driven much of the global refining capacity to China. High labour costs, stringent environmental regulations and, finally, the complex planning requirements, make domestic processing in countries like Australia economically unviable without significant government support.

A key theme was the West's role in creating its own dependency. Over recent decades, Western economies—including the U.S., Europe and Australia—outsourced production and processing to China in pursuit of cheaper, more efficient supply chains.

This strategic convenience enabled China to build global dominance in critical mineral refining, now controlling around 90% of its capacity. The current geopolitical tensions, marked by mutual trade restrictions and security-driven policies, were seen as the inevitable consequence of these earlier choices.

Overall, it is essential to highlight that today's contest over rare earths is not merely an economic issue, but a reflection of shifting global power dynamics. China's rise, accelerated by Western disengagement and its strategic outreach across Africa, has altered the balance of influence in critical supply chains. In addition, many participants emphasised that this competition is deeply intertwined with broader geopolitical and geoeconomic struggles—underscoring that the management of rare earths cannot be viewed in isolation from global power structures, historical patterns of resource control and evolving international alliances.



## RECLAIMING CONTROL: CONFRONTING THE STRATEGIC WEAKNESSES IN THE GLOBAL RARE EARTH SUPPLY CHAIN

While the U.S., UK and other Western nations retain strong capabilities in manufacturing end products—such as magnets—and in commodity trading, they largely lack the capacity for the intermediate refining and processing stages, where China maintains clear dominance. This dependency continues to expose Western economies to strategic vulnerabilities, despite efforts to diversify supply chains.

From a British standpoint, there is cautious optimism, given the country's status as a global hub for metals and commodity trading. The UK's involvement in market infrastructure could allow it to remain influential without directly engaging in large-scale processing. However, many participants expressed scepticism about whether forthcoming government strategies will meaningfully alter the balance, particularly given the scale of China's entrenched capacity and market leverage.

In the U.S., policy direction remains complex. Trade tensions and tariff policies have complicated relationships with key players such as Brazil—the second-largest processor—while domestic industrial policy has yet to address the long-term effects of supply chain hollowing that began after the 2008 financial crisis.

In summary, the session illustrated that Western economies' decades-long emphasis on outsourcing physical production, while prioritising high-tech and service sectors, has left them strategically exposed. Rebuilding midstream capability is now viewed as essential to restoring resilience and competitiveness in the global critical minerals market.

## LESSONS FROM CHINA'S LONG-TERM VISION

China's strategic approach to economic and geopolitical power continues to demonstrate the effectiveness of long-term planning over short-term gain. Historical examples, such as the return of Hong Kong, reflect a mindset rooted in patience, foresight and endurance—traits that have similarly guided China's Belt and Road Initiative and dominance in critical mineral processing, where it now controls around 90% of global refining capacity.

In contrast, Western economies have often prioritised immediate profit, outsourcing complex or “dirty” industries and, in doing so, hollowing out their own manufacturing and supply chain resilience. This imbalance reveals a deeper cultural and strategic divergence: **while China and several Pacific and Middle Eastern nations invest in sustainable, long-horizon objectives, Western consumerism continues to drive overconsumption and dependency.**

Overall, the discussion underscores a key paradox of modern prosperity—global demand for convenience and constant consumption fuels environmental degradation and strategic vulnerability. As supply chains tighten and competition for critical resources intensifies, reassessing priorities between rights, responsibilities and sustainable restraint becomes not only an economic imperative, but a geopolitical necessity.

# RESOURCE GOVERNANCE AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS

## **THE HIGH COST OF EXTRACTION:** ENVIRONMENTAL AND ETHICAL RISKS IN THE GLOBAL RACE FOR RARE EARTH MINERALS

Drawing from firsthand industry experience, there was a thorough discussion on large-scale exploration and drilling operations—such as those involving Anglo American and its merger with Teck Resources—as major players pivot away from coal toward iron ore, gold and rare earth elements. While the strategic importance of these materials continues to grow, the environmental toll of extraction and processing remains severe.

Rare earth mining is associated with widespread soil contamination, toxic solvent use, acid leaching and significant risks of water pollution from tailings and runoff. Historical incidents, including a catastrophic mine collapse in Brazil that resulted in hundreds of fatalities, underscore the devastating human and ecological impacts when environmental management fails. The discussion also highlighted that these pollutants not only damage local ecosystems, but also infiltrate global food chains, by reducing crop yields, contaminating livestock and threatening long-term food security.



A geopolitical dimension was also highlighted through analysis of rare earth deposits in regions like Ukraine, where resource-rich agricultural zones overlap with key drainage and arable lands—illustrating the strategic motivations behind both Russian and Western interests. Concerns were expressed about key global powers, particularly the U.S. and China, pursuing rare earth dominance primarily for military and economic advantage, often sidelining sustainability and human welfare.

In conclusion, the discussion ended with the summarisation that the race for rare earth minerals has evolved into a moral and environmental dilemma: nations are competing for control of materials essential to modern technology and defence, yet the extraction processes threaten the very ecosystems that sustain human life. Without stronger global standards, transparency and long-term accountability, the pursuit of critical minerals risks deepening both environmental degradation and geopolitical instability.



## **LOCAL CAPACITY AND GLOBAL ACCOUNTABILITY:** BUILDING FAIRER FRAMEWORKS FOR CRITICAL MINERAL INVESTMENT

It is significant to stress the urgent need to rebalance global investment in critical minerals toward fair, transparent and locally-driven development models. Across many regions, powerful nations continue to extract resources through weakly regulated frameworks that fail to provide tangible benefits to host populations. The absence of strong oversight and safeguard perpetuates cycles of exploitation, causing environmental harm and economic inequality.

Positive examples from Mongolia—and increasingly from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—illustrate the potential of national ownership and local capacity-building. These countries are developing models that primarily prioritise indigenous expertise, retain greater value within local economies and reduce dependency on external powers. As Russian influence decreases across Central Asia, these approaches demonstrate that sustainable and sovereign resource governance is achievable when investment aligns with local participation, transparency and, most importantly, implementing a long-term capacity development.

## **RESOURCE GOVERNANCE IN FOCUS:** SOVEREIGNTY, STANDARDS AND THE LIMITS OF GLOBAL CHANGE

Systemic reform of global resource practices is necessary but unlikely to occur immediately. It can be seen that short-term realities—political fragmentation, competing strategic interests, along with entrenched commercial incentives—continue to constrain meaningful, rapid change across supply chains and host communities.

The U.S.' commercial entry into mining can introduce technical standards, corporate governance, as well as shareholder-driven ethical baselines that often improve workplace safety and operational practice. In several projects, this has translated into the transfer of engineering practices and higher compliance norms that benefit local workforces. Nevertheless, strategic motives and transactional behaviour undermine confidence in long-term partnership commitments.

Strong national control and local ownership can deliver resilience: examples from Mongolia show that nationally operated mines staffed by local engineers and labour tend to guard sovereignty and manage risk more tightly. Conversely, ad hoc security arrangements—such as paying armed groups to protect community programs in parts of Africa—illustrate how pragmatic, but sometimes morally ambiguous solutions, are deployed to preserve immediate stability.

In the end, effective policy must recognise cultural nuance and local priorities. Responses grounded in operational realities—rather than abstract prescriptions—are more likely to succeed. Any pathway forward will require balancing external standards with respect not only for national autonomy and investment in local capacity, but also for pragmatic measures that protect communities while pursuing sustainable resource development.

# STRATEGIC REALIGNMENTS AND GLOBAL POWER PLAYS

## **THE HIDDEN TOLL OF GLOBAL MINING: POWER, PROFIT AND THE EROSION OF ACCOUNTABILITY**

The discussion highlighted the stark contrasts between corporate responsibility and illicit operations within the global mining sector. Large multinational corporations, such as Anglo American, were noted for maintaining strong governance frameworks, comprehensive training programmes and improved community engagement, particularly in regions with indigenous populations. These developments reflect a growing commitment to ethical operations and workforce empowerment, driven in part by public scrutiny and the transparency imposed by global communication networks.

However, outside the bounds of regulated industry, a darker reality persists. In countries such as Zambia and Botswana, unregulated artisanal and rogue mining continues to thrive under the control of organised crime networks. These operations are marked by dangerous working conditions, rampant exploitation and, sadly, frequent fatalities. Therefore, the conversation underscored that efforts to address these issues often focus narrowly on the labourers at the bottom of the chain, rather than targeting the transnational criminal entities financing and profiting from illicit trade.

Drawing parallels to broader trafficking networks across Africa—whether of minerals, wildlife or people—the discussion emphasised the need for enforcement strategies that strike at the command level rather than the operational periphery. The dialogue concluded with a sobering reflection on the erosion of humanitarian principles, calling for renewed global accountability and a re-centring of human dignity in both corporate and law enforcement practices.



## THE NEW RESOURCE RACE: POWER, PROFIT AND THE PRICE OF EXTRACTION

The discussion highlighted the expanding scope of global competition for natural resources, extending far beyond rare earth elements to include critical materials such as copper, which has seen its value triple in recent years. Drawing from experience in Namibia's copper industry, it was underscored how the surge in commodity prices has transformed these materials into high-value strategic assets, attracting new forms of economic crime and geopolitical interest. Security risks—once minimal—now range from theft and corruption to the broader manipulation of supply chains by state and corporate actors.

This shift was framed as part of a new wave of resource colonialism, in which powerful nations and corporations seek control over essential raw materials from developing economies. Examples such as Sudan illustrate how resource wealth can deepen instability: vast land acquisitions by foreign powers, such as the UAE's agricultural investments, have compounded internal divisions and external dependencies. Furthermore, it was emphasised that modern competition for resources now extends across energy, agriculture and technology—reshaping both geopolitical alignments and local economies.

Overall, the session raised important questions about the full lifecycle of resource use, including the ethical and environmental costs of extraction and disposal. As developing nations increasingly reject the burden of handling industrial waste and so-called 'recycling' from wealthier countries, global inequalities in production and consumption are becoming more visible. The time has come for the international community to confront the emerging reality of interconnected crises—economic, environmental and ethical—driven by the relentless pursuit of resource control in an era of escalating global demand.

## POWER OR POVERTY: THE GEOPOLITICAL CURSE OF AFRICA'S RARE EARTH WEALTH

The geopolitical paradox of natural resource wealth, focusing on how rare earth and critical mineral reserves can either empower nations or entrench instability, was further explored over the session. Drawing comparisons between countries such as Sudan, South Sudan and Turkey, participants highlighted the contrasting outcomes of resource discovery and exploitation.

In Africa, vast mineral wealth has too often become a source of division and dependency rather than development. The example of Sudan—once among Africa's richest nations before its division into Sudan and South Sudan—illustrates how resource abundance, coupled with political manipulation and weak governance, can fuel corruption, conflict and humanitarian crises. Despite possessing significant reserves of oil, gold and rare earth elements, South Sudan continues to struggle with food insecurity, health crises and systemic instability, demonstrating the enduring 'resource curse' that affects many African states.

By contrast, recent discoveries of rare earth elements in Turkey were discussed as potentially stabilising, enhancing the nation's geopolitical strength and economic resilience. This comparison underscores how a resource wealth's impact depends heavily on institutional strength, political intent, as well as international positioning.

All in all, the session concluded that while rare earth elements represent enormous strategic and economic potential, their benefits are unequally distributed—with many African nations left deliberately underdeveloped to preserve access for external powers. Therefore, it is crucial to reinforce the need for stronger governance, equitable partnerships and sustainable resource management to ensure that Africa's mineral wealth becomes a foundation for prosperity rather than a perpetuation of exploitation.

## THE WEST'S CAUTIOUS APPROACH TO GLOBAL POLITICAL UPHEAVAL

Recent global unrest has highlighted a deliberate shift in Western strategy—from direct intervention to cautious observation. Rather than engaging militarily as in past decades, Western nations appear to be adopting a wait-and-see approach, allowing internal political dynamics to unfold before determining diplomatic or economic engagement.

This restrained posture reflects growing public fatigue with foreign interventions and a recognition of the complex consequences such actions often produce, as seen in regions like the Middle East and North Africa. The approach mirrors previous instances, such as the aftermath of the Arab Spring, when the West largely observed from the sidelines until new political orders emerged. This evolving strategy underscores a broader recalibration of foreign policy priorities, emphasising pragmatic engagement over interventionist ideology.



## CHAINED TO CHINA: THE WEST'S BATTLE TO RECLAIM CONTROL OF GLOBAL SUPPLY LINES

Global supply chains remain deeply intertwined with China, leaving Western economies with limited room to manoeuvre despite growing geopolitical and economic tensions. While discussions around boycotts or sourcing alternatives surface periodically, there is little tangible shift in consumer behaviour or corporate strategy. Nearly every product—from clothing to electronics—contains Chinese components, and the economic implications of rapid decoupling make large-scale change unrealistic in the short term.

From a retail perspective, businesses continue to rely heavily on Chinese manufacturing due to cost efficiency and production capacity. Attempts to localise production have proven difficult, as illustrated by cases such as Leicester's garment industry, where local manufacturers briefly gained traction by offering faster turnaround times than overseas suppliers. However, these efforts often faced backlash over labour practices and cultural misunderstandings regarding family-based business models.

The broader issue highlights a systemic challenge: **Western markets prioritise speed, cost and convenience, but lack the structural resilience and industrial agility to compete with China's long-term, state-aligned economic strategy.** Unless there is a fundamental shift toward sustainable and flexible production models, Western economies risk remaining perpetually reactive—dependent on a system they no longer control.

## THE GLOBAL IMPACT OF U.S. - CHINA COMPETITION IN AFRICA

The growing strategic competition between the United States and China across Africa was thoroughly examined, particularly in the context of critical mineral investments. With Russia's influence declining, local populations are increasingly critical of China's extensive investments, creating space for U.S. involvement. The extent and nature of American engagement will likely shape geopolitical balances and influence local economic outcomes in the coming years.

From a retail and supply chain perspective, short-term disruptions are expected due to inflation, rising prices and logistical challenges linked to this geopolitical competition. However, stabilisation is possible if an understanding or agreement emerges between the two global powers. The situation underscores the interconnectedness between global politics, resource security and economic stability, with outcomes largely dependent on strategic decisions taken by the most powerful economic actors.

## COMPETING FOR CONTROL: ECONOMIC POWER AND THE NEW ERA OF RESOURCE-DRIVEN GEOPOLITICS

The global contest over critical minerals is entering a new phase defined less by military intervention and more by economic manoeuvring. As major powers pursue access to strategic resources, the geopolitical landscape increasingly reflects transactional politics and a prioritisation of national self-interest, along with the reemergence of economic realpolitik.

China continues to leverage long-term strategy and centralised policy to secure dominance in mineral supply chains, mirroring historical patterns of expansion through influence and infrastructure investment. In contrast, the United States appears to be shifting toward a more unilateral, business-focused approach—prioritising domestic gain and direct economic engagement over traditional alliance-based strategies. This recalibration suggests that future competition will be centred not on territorial control, but on access, investment and market leverage.

The next several years are likely to see intensified economic conflicts over minerals critical to energy transition and technology development. These dynamics underscore the need for coherent, forward-looking policy in the West to balance commercial ambition with strategic stability—before the race for resources reshapes global power relations once again.



# SUSTAINABILITY AND FUTURE PATHWAYS

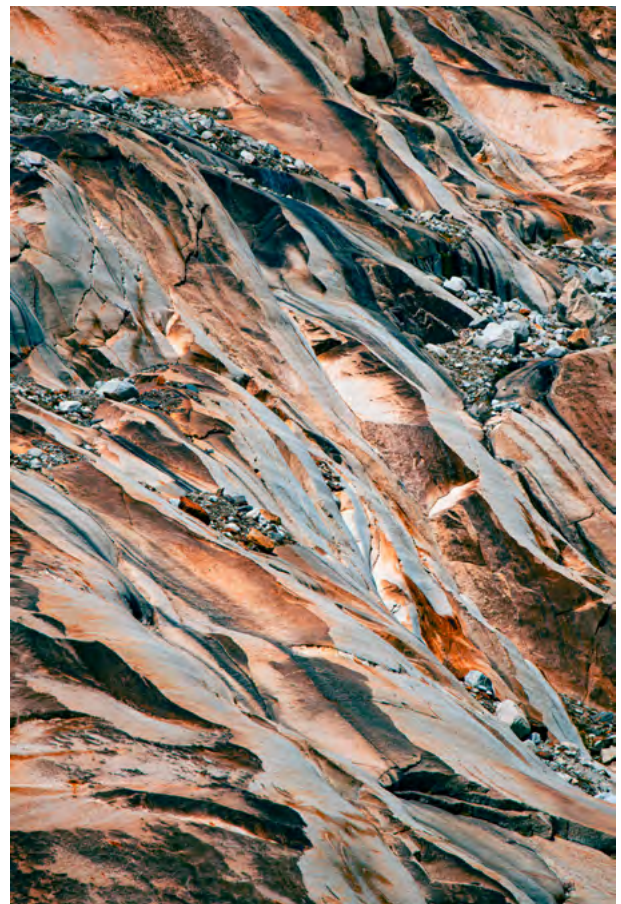
## **BEYOND MINING:** A PATH TOWARD SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS IN THE RARE EARTH INDUSTRY

There is a shifting focus from the environmental and geopolitical challenges of rare earth extraction to the emerging opportunities in sustainable material management. The discussion underscored the importance of the **‘four R’s’—reduce, replace, reuse and reallocate**—as key strategies for mitigating reliance on traditional mining and refining processes, which remain costly and environmentally damaging.

The discussion outlined **three tiers of mineral use—nano, micro and macro**—noting that, while nano-scale applications (such as in electronic capacitors) use minimal quantities of rare earths, large-scale industrial and technological uses drive the majority of demand and environmental impact. Encouragingly, advances in materials science and molecular engineering are already reducing the amount of rare earth content required in critical technologies like magnets, signalling a gradual shift toward efficiency and innovation.

Participants also highlighted the potential of recycling and reclamation as cleaner, more sustainable sources of rare earths, since older technologies often contain higher concentrations of these materials than freshly mined ore. In the event of severe shortages, strategic reallocation—prioritising defence and essential industries—was identified as a likely response.

Overall, the discussion called for a broader adoption of circular economy principles, emphasising innovation and resource stewardship over extraction. While mining remains an unavoidable part of global supply, the future of critical minerals may increasingly depend on smarter use, cleaner recovery and more responsible redistribution—**offering a more hopeful vision for balancing technological progress with environmental responsibility.**



# CASE STUDIES

## **SERBIA'S JADAR PROJECT: BALANCING OPPORTUNITY AND RISK IN EUROPE'S GREEN TRANSITION**

The session examined the Jadar Project in western Serbia—an initiative centred on jadarite, a unique mineral containing lithium and boron, both essential for electric vehicle production and clean energy storage. Discovered in 2004 by Rio Tinto, the project has attracted significant international attention as Europe seeks to reduce dependency on Chinese-controlled critical mineral supply chains. However, the technical, environmental and political complexities surrounding the project have made it one of the most contested mining developments in the region.

It is also important to mention that the extraction of jadarite remains untested and potentially high-risk, raising concerns among local communities and environmental groups about water contamination and waste management, along with land degradation. While proponents argue that responsible mining techniques—such as dry tailings processing—could mitigate these impacts, public distrust remains high. Ongoing protests and debates underscore broader tensions between national economic ambitions, foreign investment interests and local environmental protection.

Furthermore, the discussion highlighted Serbia's strategic crossroads: navigating between its long-standing economic ties with China, a major investor in regional infrastructure, and increasing engagement with the European Union and the United States, both eager to secure sustainable lithium supplies. Observers cautioned that the project's success will not only depend on transparent governance and environmental safeguards, but also community trust—not just profitability or political will.

Ultimately, the Jadar Project symbolises both the promise and peril of the global green transition: **the potential to advance cleaner energy futures, set against the real social and ecological costs of resource extraction.** Its outcome may define not only Serbia's role in Europe's energy strategy, but also the credibility of 'sustainable mining' as a global ideal.

## **AUSTRALIA'S STRATEGIC CHALLENGE IN RARE EARTH MINERALS PROCESSING**

Australia's critical, yet underleveraged role in the global rare earth and critical minerals supply chain plays a key role. While the country possesses significant reserves of cobalt, lithium, nickel and other essential minerals—particularly in Western Australia and the Northern Territory—most of these resources are currently exported to China for processing. Despite being the world's fourth-largest cobalt producer, Australia lacks sufficient domestic refining capability, leaving it dependent on Chinese processing facilities that control approximately 90% of global refining capacity.

There is growing pressure on the Australian government to strengthen sovereign capability by developing local processing infrastructure. However, technological barriers, high costs and limited access to Chinese refining expertise present major challenges. With China holding a dominant position, supplying around 70% of U.S. rare earth imports, the global balance of power in this sector remains heavily skewed.

The discussion underscored that, while Australia is well positioned geologically, significant investment and strategic coordination are required to reduce dependency and build resilience in the critical minerals supply chain.

## **POWER, POVERTY AND PROFIT: THE FRAGILE NEXUS OF STABILITY AND RESOURCE CONTROL IN THE DRC**

The current landscape across parts of Africa, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), reflects deep-seated economic frustration driven by unemployment, corruption and food insecurity. Much of the unrest stems from the imbalance between the promise of economic opportunity through foreign investment and the lived reality of inequitable systems that fail to benefit local populations. While employment in mining operations may provide some financial relief and a sense of stability, the broader structure remains profit-driven with limited local empowerment or fair distribution of wealth.

The growing influence of both Western and Chinese investors in the critical minerals sector intensifies this imbalance. Local communities face ongoing exploitation, caught between the interests of international powers and the corruption of state and militia groups. Many workers are taxed multiple times—by militias, by government forces, as well as by local authorities—leaving them trapped in cycles of dependency and frustration.

The recently signed Washington Accord, aimed at de-escalating tensions between Rwanda and the DRC, exemplifies the geopolitical complexity underpinning this struggle. Framed as a peace agreement, it includes provisions for Rwanda's military withdrawal and the disarmament of non-state armed groups. However, it also embeds an understanding that grants the United States access to the DRC's critical mineral reserves in exchange for security support. This linkage between peace, resources and power underscores a broader pattern—where promises of stability are often tied to strategic economic gain rather than genuine development for local populations.

Ultimately, the situation reveals a troubling paradox: **progress defined by external investment, yet undermined by exploitation with the human cost of global resource dependency, is continuing to rise.**

## **NIGERIA'S BALANCING ACT: OPPORTUNITY AND RISK IN THE EMERGING RARE EARTH INDUSTRY**

During the session, an important perspective was offered regarding Nigeria's evolving role within the global rare earth and critical minerals landscape. The country is beginning to develop domestic processing capabilities, marking a shift from simply exporting raw materials to capturing greater value within its own borders. This movement has been viewed positively by the Nigerian government, which sees it as an opportunity to generate new revenue streams and enhance national economic resilience.

However, concerns were raised about the environmental and social implications of this growth. Questions remain over how much of the economic benefit will reach local communities and whether adequate safeguards exist to prevent pollution, corruption and conflict over resource control. While new mining policies are being introduced to bring structure and oversight to the sector, their long-term effectiveness will depend on transparency, enforcement, as well as community inclusion.

The discussion concluded that Nigeria's experience reflects a global dilemma—balancing the economic promise of rare earth development against its environmental and social costs. As demand for critical minerals accelerates worldwide, nations face mounting pressure to pursue sustainability while securing economic advantage.

In this context, the broader future of resource exploration could foresee a big transition, imagining that, as terrestrial resources become scarce, humanity may one day look beyond Earth—to the moon or Mars—for the next frontier of extraction.

# POLICY IMPERATIVES AND GLOBAL ACCOUNTABILITY

## CONFRONTING THE GLOBAL CRISIS DEMANDING UNIFIED ACTION

A powerful reminder over the session was deducted that every global challenge, from rare earth extraction to environmental policy, is now inseparable from geopolitics. Governments, the private sector and transnational organisations must collaborate far more closely, as fragmented or insular approaches are no longer viable in an increasingly interconnected and competitive world.

A key theme was the need for accountability and coordination between public and private sectors, reinforced by incentives—but also deterrents—to ensure transparency and responsible action. Many participants pointed out that geopolitical forces underpin issues often viewed in isolation, including organised crime, resource security and environmental policy. The notion of ‘organized crime’ has become almost meaningless without understanding its geopolitical and financial dimensions, especially when global supply chains and digital infrastructures are at stake.

The discussion also highlighted rising cyber threats, particularly the myth that large-scale corporate hacks are the work of isolated individuals. Instead, these attacks reflect a systemic, state-linked challenge that law enforcement and policymakers are ill-prepared to address. Likewise, Western academia’s vulnerability to foreign influence—particularly from China—marks a growing concern requiring urgent attention.

While environmental stewardship remains critical, it is important to acknowledge that geopolitical and economic realities may force difficult trade-offs in the near term. Therefore, many participants urged greater scrutiny of how environmental NGOs and international institutions frame the debate—often avoiding politically sensitive realities in favour of simplified narratives. The upcoming COP30 summit was identified as a key test for whether environmental advocacy can adapt to these hard geopolitical truths.

Regarding the recent conflicts in Eastern DRC, attention was drawn to how mineral wealth, armed militias and external financing intertwine with international complacency. The omission of Rwanda and M23 from UN discourse on regional stability was described as emblematic of the deeper reluctance to confront uncomfortable geopolitical facts.

In closing, it is significant to establish a more mature, clear-eyed response to global instability. In order to be able to navigate these uncharted waters, it is essential that nations and institutions alike must shed naivety, engage in uncomfortable conversations and, most importantly, recognise that security, sustainability and sovereignty are now inseparable dimensions of the same global struggle.

## **REALPOLITIK AND SURVIVAL:** THE HUMAN IMPERATIVE DRIVING RESOURCE CONFLICTS

The discussion framed resource competition through the lens of realpolitik and everyday survival: for many communities, immediate needs—food, shelter and family welfare—take precedence over abstract ideals. Historical patterns of exploitation and conflict around mineral wealth underscore that coercion and economic desperation often drive participation in illicit or dangerous activities, even when those actions conflict with broader ethical standards.

This perspective highlights the moral complexity of policy responses. While principled support for human rights and environmental stewardship is essential, interventions that ignore local survival imperatives risk being ineffective or counterproductive. Durable solutions, therefore, require a balance between enforcement and realistic economic opportunity—measures that reduce incentives for violent or criminal behaviour, while providing viable livelihoods.

In conclusion, addressing resource-driven instability demands policies grounded in both ethical commitments and pragmatic understanding of local conditions. It is crucial to strengthen governance and accountability at scale, show willingness to create legitimate economic pathways for affected populations and, last but not least, design interventions that acknowledge the fundamental human drive to survive.



# CLOSING REFLECTIONS

## **CONFRONTING FRAGMENTATION THROUGH COOPERATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

The session concluded with a shared recognition that the world's most pressing geopolitical and economic challenges—particularly those surrounding critical minerals and supply chain resilience—stem from persistent failures in global governance and cooperation. Despite decades of discussion, the divide between public institutions, private corporations and international organisations remains wide, constrained by a series of factors such as entrenched interests and competing priorities. Meaningful progress will require not only structural reform, but also a cultural shift toward humility and a genuine alignment of shared global objectives.

Moreover, it was underscored that resource competition is no longer solely an economic or industrial concern, but a complex interplay of power, ethics and survival. Major powers, including the United States, China and Russia, continue to reshape global supply chains through strategic manoeuvres, while regions such as Africa and Eastern Europe bear the social and environmental costs of these ambitions. Issues of organised crime, corruption and exploitation remain deeply embedded in the system, further destabilising local communities and eroding trust in global governance.

Resilience emerged as a recurring theme—defined not only by technological capacity or market stability, but by the protection of human welfare and the integrity of supply chains. It is crucial to highlight that achieving sustainability in the resource economy requires collaboration that bridges the divides not only between governments and industries, but also civil societies. True stability will depend on recognising shared vulnerabilities and embracing cross-sector cooperation as both a strategic and moral imperative.

All in all, the key message is clear: navigating the complexities of global supply chains demands certain attributes: for instance, persistence, realism and collective accountability. Only through coordinated action, the global community can move beyond competition towards a more balanced and resilient international order.