NATO Foundation
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Source: NYT.

The Cobalt Window:

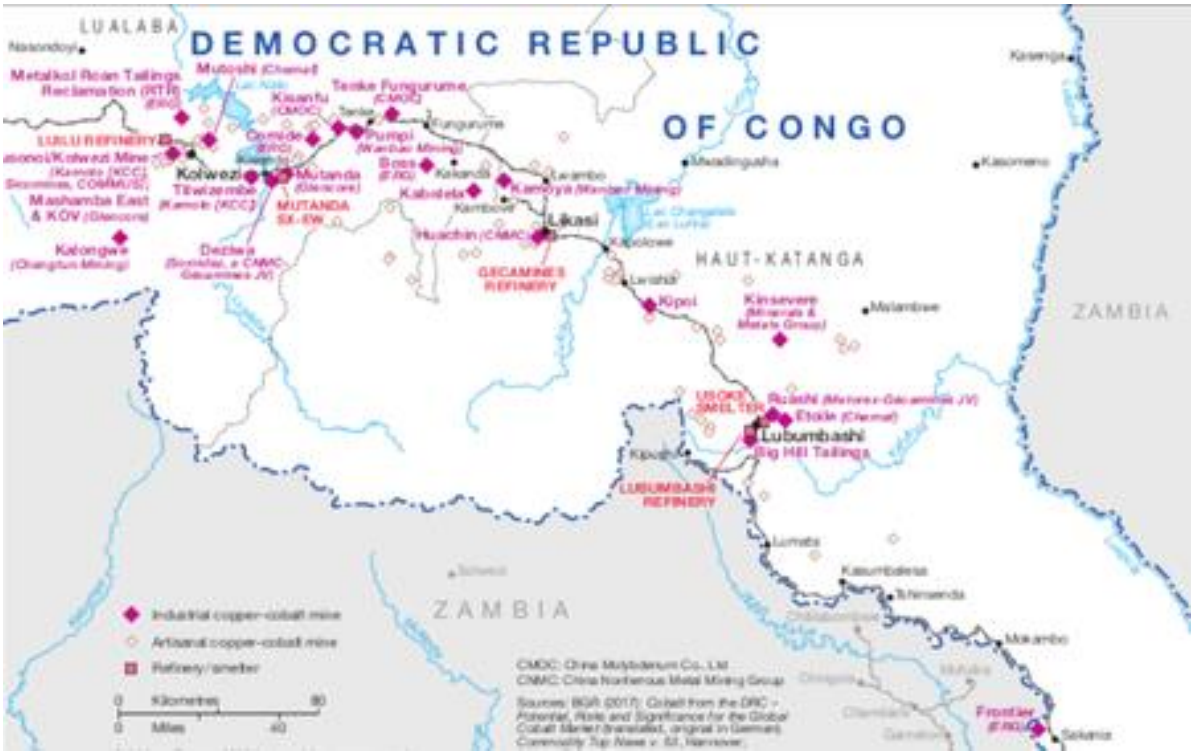
Congolese Leverage, Chinese Dominance, and the Limits of American Minerals Diplomacy

By Smith Graham

In February 2025, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) shocked producers by implementing a cobalt export ban. In the decades before the ban, China captured the cobalt supply chain through control of both extraction in the DRC and global refining infrastructure. The DRC's 2025 export restrictions created a narrow window of leverage. For the first time, Kinshasa possessed sufficient resource power to compel meaningful Western security commitments. Yet the United States responded by signing a temporary minerals trade deal with Beijing, rather than by sustained investment in Congolese stabilisation. Unless the US and its European partners, France above all, convert mineral dependency into durable peace-building commitments in eastern DRC, China will use each successive American détente to deepen its long-term grip on the supply chain that Western defence and energy transitions cannot do without.

The DRC produces 80% of global cobalt; Chinese companies own 70% of its industrial mines in the DRC and control over 80% of processing.[1] With state-support and no ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) constraints, Chinese miners expand their control each time Western firms divest from eastern DRC because of insecurity. This makes Western ethical frameworks self-defeating without genuine security investment.

[1] Martin, et al. "US-China Metals Fight Finds New Home in Congo's Cobalt Mines", Bloomberg, 20 May 2025.



Source: African Energy.

The cobalt export ban, extended until mid-October,[2] followed the price of cobalt reaching a nine-year low, beneath $10 per pound, a 75% drop from cobalt's peak value in May 2022, after China Molybdenum Company (CMOC) brought the Kisanfu mine into production in 2022. Kisanfu is now the world's largest cobalt mine, and CMOC controls 48% of cobalt in the DRC. DRC cobalt royalties fell more than 40% to $409 million in 2023, despite a 20% increase in production. Chinese firms, backed by state capital, absorb these price declines in exchange for long-term market dominance.[3]

While the DRC has lifted the cobalt export ban, the country has instituted strict export quotas, roughly half of 2024 DRC cobalt exports, which reduce its global cobalt supply share from 75% to 50% through 2035.[4] The doubling of cobalt price in the wake of the export ban confirms that the DRC's resource nationalism creates real leverage.

In June 2025 the DRC and Rwanda signed a Washington-brokered peace agreement, which includes a regional economic integration framework for critical minerals.[5] Concurrently, the USA and DRC

[2] Yu. "DRC cobalt export quotas to support cobalt prices, though challenges loom", S&P Global, 16 October 2025.
[3] Martin et al.
[4] Yu.
[5] US Bureau of African Affairs. "Peace Agreement Between the DRC and Rwanda", State Department, 27 June 2025.

signed a strategic partnership agreement, which grants the USA and US-aligned companies' preferential mineral access in exchange for US security cooperation and infrastructure investment[6]. Kinshasa's cobalt leverage and China's supply chain have created an opening in which the US seeks to trade security for minerals access. US deals, such as Glencore's prospective sale of 40% of its copper-cobalt mines to Orion CMC and a DFC-backed Gécamines-Mercuria joint venture, signal Western interest in Congolese mining, but neither addresses Chinese processing dominance.

However, Rwandan troops remain in Congolese territory, and M23-Kinshasa talks are deadlocked.[7] Furthermore, US corporate risk appetite for Congolese mining assets remains limited without demonstrated stability. The minerals-for-security model contains a fundamental paradox: investment requires stability, but stability requires investment.

How the US-China Trade Deals Complicate the Picture

Following the DRC cobalt export ban, the USA and China struck the November 2025 Busan trade deal, in which China suspended export controls on rare earths, gallium, germanium, antimony and graphite until November 2026.[8] Cobalt was not included.

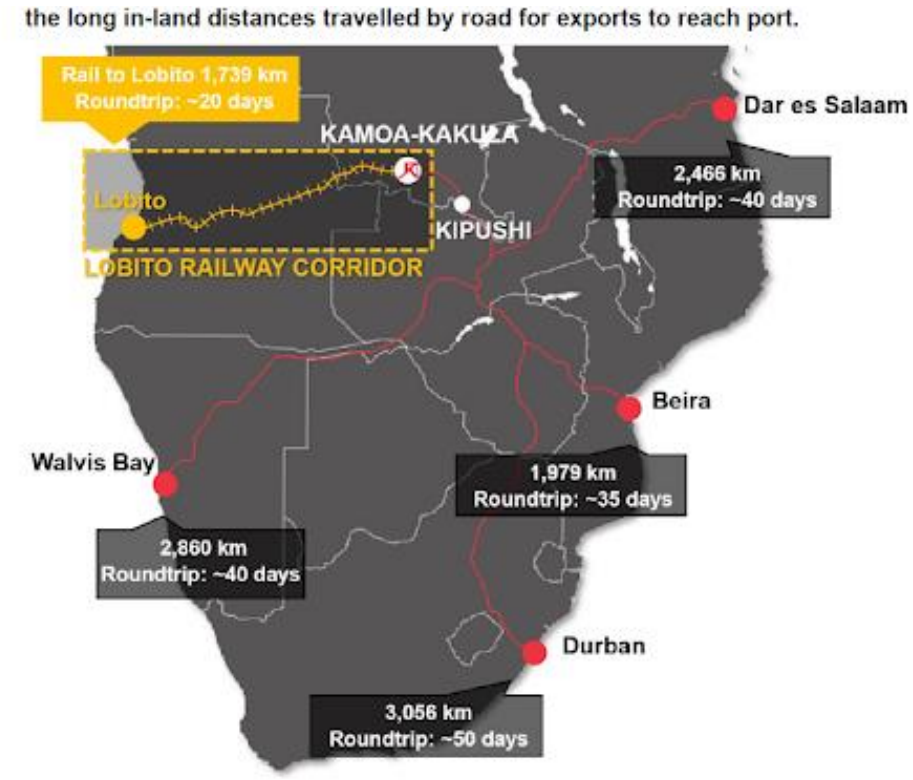
China simultaneously signed a minerals cooperation deal with Kinshasa, eliminating export duties on DRC minerals from May 2026 and granting China priority on key mining projects, signalling continued Chinese backing for mineral extraction[9]. While the Busan trade deal temporarily eased US-China tension on rare earths, China has used the interval to further entrench its structural position on cobalt, the one mineral the Busan deal did not touch.

What Durable Stabilisation Requires

The Washington peace agreement assumes that minerals revenue and Western investment will generate the conditions for peace. However, Rwanda violated the agreement within days, DRC-M23 negotiations remain deadlocked and Western corporate appetite for Congolese mining assets has

[6] US Bureau of African Affairs. "Strategic Partnership Agreement Between the US and the DRC", State Department, 4 December 2025.
[7] ICG. "The M23 Offensive: Elusive Peace in the Great Lakes", International Crisis Group, 19 December 2025.
[8] Nikakhtar, et al. "United States and China Negotiate One-Year Trade Deal", Wiley Rein, 17 November 2025.
[9] Kasongo, et al. "Congo, China deepen mining ties as US pushes rival minerals pact", Reuters, 27 March 2026.

improved but has still not translated to committed capital. Investment requires security, but the Washington peace agreement conditions security on mineral access that insecurity prevents.



Source: Ivanhoe. APRI.

This paradox is exemplified by the failure of the Lobito corridor, partly functional, severely degraded, and operating under 5% of capacity. The security conditions along key transit zones of the Lobito corridor are expected to deteriorate through 2027.[10] The corridor is failing precisely because Washington assumed investment would create security, rather than follow from it. A geographically bounded USA-EU security commitment along the corridor is a concrete path forward the minerals-first approach has failed to provide.

The most fundamental condition for stability is the verified withdrawal of Rwandan Defense Force (RDF) troops from the region. The Washington peace agreement committed Rwanda to withdraw

[10] Walschot, Maureen. "Infrastructure, extraction, and accountability around the Lobito Corridor in southern DRC", IPIS, 3 December 2025. Crisis24. "Lobito Corridor Project: Strategic Supply Chain to Remain Contested Security Environment." Crisis24, 6 August 2025.

from eastern Congo, but while Kagame was in Washington signing the agreement, RDF soldiers were helping M23 insurgents take Uvira[11]. Rwandan sanctions should be tied to verifiable withdrawal and a cessation of Rwandan support to M23.

DRC security alone does not solve Western dependence on Chinese cobalt refining. The USA should also back cobalt processing infrastructure through the Development Finance Corporation. Given existing infrastructure, Morocco and Zambia are the most viable targets.

The European Dimension: France's Triangulated Position

The EU's response to cobalt supply risk mirrors Washington's structural failure. The Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), in force since 2024, sets a binding benchmark that no single country should supply more than 65% of any strategic raw material at any stage of the supply chain. China's 80% share of cobalt refining already violates this benchmark. The EU's 2023 Strategic Partnership with the DRC committed to infrastructure investment and preferential mineral access, but regulation has not translated into security investment.[12]

As a P5 member, a leading EU economy, and a state with deep institutional knowledge of central and east Africa, France is positioned to bridge the US-led minerals diplomacy of the Washington Accords and the EU's regulatory architecture. Yet France's ability to act is constrained by the most enduring liability in its African policy: its debated involvement in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. France cannot apply robust pressure on Rwanda without reactivating its own historical issue. Additionally, the EU signed a MoU (Memorandum of Undersan) with Rwanda under CRMA, paradoxically making the EU both Rwanda's partner and accuser.

France is positioned to argue within the EU Council that the Rwanda MoU, by routing minerals through Chinese-dominated processing, compounds the very dependency the CRMA exists to prevent. Conditioning the MoU on Rwanda's verified compliance with the Washington peace agreement converts a diplomatic liability into an instrument of leverage. A formal Samoa agreement review (under Article 101) of Rwanda's obligations would not itself produce sanctions but would create a record of non-compliance that reinforces existing US Treasury sanctions and strengthens the case for MoU conditionality.

[11] HRW. "Investigating the M23's Occupation of Uvira in Eastern DR Congo", Human Rights Watch, 1 April 2026.
[12] European Commission. "European Critical Raw Materials Act", European Commission, 16 March 2023.

Rwanda cannot claim sovereignty over commitments it has formally accepted under the Washington agreement. European aid provides the material leverage. Belgium, Germany and the UK have already suspended aid cooperation over Rwanda's DRC conduct, and Rwanda risks losing European Investment Bank and Global Gateway financing.[13]

The expiration of the Busan trade agreement in November 2026 is France's window to channel renewed US critical minerals urgency into a US-EU minerals security mechanism.

Failure to coordinate on security in the DRC has undermined Western ability to generate a secure critical minerals supply chain. Until the US and France, as the natural US-EU interlocutor, coordinate on a security-first process in the DRC, the West will continue to lose ground to China's decades-long strategy. The US must treat security as a precondition, rather than a byproduct of investment; the EU must enforce its own CRMA benchmark; and France must institutionalise that coordination before the Busan deal expires in November 2026.

[13] Bertelsmann Stiftung. "BTI 2026: Rwanda: BTI 2026." BTI Transformation Index, 2026.