

OPEN: POLICY

USA – DRC MINERALS FOR SECURITY PARTNERSHIP

Will it work?

Claude Kabemba



SARW

Southern Africa Resource Watch

The DRC government, in an unprecedented move, has approached the Trump administration to partner in the exploitation of the abundant DRC minerals, many of them critical to any transition away from fossil fuels. President Tshisekedi is offering the Trump administration access to critical minerals in exchange for protection against the M23 rebel movement that is threatening to overthrow his regime. Why would the USA be interested?

The DRC is a resource-rich country. It is the world's biggest producer of cobalt, a key metal needed for electric vehicle batteries and energy storage. The DRC also has one of the biggest reserves of lithium in the world. It is the biggest producer of copper in Africa (second in the world), and has the biggest reserve of germanium in Africa. The country is also the biggest producer of coltan. These resources are important even apart from energy; they are also needed in defence, electronics and aviation.

The struggle among world powers to control these resources is intensifying. Whoever controls the sources of critical minerals will dominate the world. In the past two decades, China has invested massively in securing the sources of critical minerals around the world. This has given China significant advantage over the USA and its allies (Europe, Britain, Japan). The USA is playing catch-up with China. Recent analysis by the International Energy Agency (IEA) suggests that the world will need around fifty new lithium mines, sixty new nickel mines and twenty-seven new cobalt mines to meet carbon emissions goals by 2030.

China is the world's leading producer and exporter of rare earth elements (REE). The entire world, including the USA, depends on China for REE. Because of its dominance in critical minerals and REE, China dominates the production and export of green technologies and semi-conductors. China is using this dominance to restrict US access to REE. Recently, China stopped the export of germanium and antimony to the USA.

The US wants to cut its dependency on China, and is prepared to annex countries (e.g., Canada and Greenland) or force countries into resource deals (e.g., Ukraine) to secure its own sources of critical minerals and REE.

President Tshisekedi understands the predicament in which the USA finds itself and wants to use it for his own advantage—to secure US protection against the M23 rebels in exchange for minerals. It is possible that, in the situation in which the USA finds itself in relation to China, the Trump administration could agree to Tshisekedi's proposed deal. However, there are several factors that might prevent the US from accepting this deal.

Firstly, the lack of transparency and accountability in the DRC mining sector could be a big hurdle. The US has always publicly maintained that it will only invest in the DRC mining sector under a transparent and accountable system. Currently, despite the DRC being a member of the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI), the management of DRC's mineral sector is far from transparent. It would be difficult for the US private sector to openly operate in the prevailing conditions of corruption and mismanagement. Before any deal could be struck, a complete overhaul of the governance system would need to be engineered. This is not a small task. Considering how entrenched corruption is in the sector, it could take years for this to happen.

Secondly, President Tshisekedi does not have readily available reserves of cobalt, copper, lithium, or coltan to offer to Trump. Chinese companies own 90 percent of the DRC's known reserves of cobalt, copper and lithium. China acquired cobalt and copper mines (mostly from US and other western companies) in the 1990s. The DRC cannot overnight take them away from China and give them to the USA. If this happened, China would drag the DRC government to court for a long time and this could render the DRC's cobalt a stranded asset.

In the presence of an industry controlled by China, the US has expressed interest in controlling the 20 percent of cobalt production from artisanal and small-scale mines (ASM), which are well known for human rights violations and child labour. However, this sector is also controlled by a Chinese syndicate, which operates in collusion with the Congolese political elite and military interests. The US would have to invest both time and resources to reorganise the sector. Again, it will take time and there is no guarantee that they will get it right

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As far as coltan is concerned, Tshisekedi has already lost control of production to the rebel M23 supported by Rwanda. The biggest coltan mine in the world, Rubaya, in the East of the DRC, which produces 120 tonnes of coltan a month, has been in M23-controlled territory since April 2024. The coltan transits through Rwanda to enter the international market, with China dominating the import. The M23 is now at the door of Walikale where Alphamin mine (an American company)

is situated. Alphamin is the only industrial mine in the DRC that produces tantalum. If M23 controls Walikale, Tshisekedi will have nothing left to offer the USA.

Another factor that the Trump administration will have to consider is the sustainability of a deal with Tshisekedi, who is in his last term of office. In three years, there will be elections for a new strongman in Kinshasa. Most possibilities on the table for US control of DRC critical minerals could take years to materialise, well beyond the three years remaining for President Tshisekedi, and even those three years could be cut short by the M23 rebels if they fulfil their promise to reach Kinshasa before April 2025. The leaders of the rebellion could then offer the same deal to the USA, and a deal with the rebels might be more appealing to Trump in the current situation. It would give the US immediate access to coltan in the eastern DRC and could provide sufficient time and space to slowly engage in resource diplomacy to get around China's dominance in the cobalt, copper and lithium sectors.

Despite the US government's readiness to agree to any deal that gives to its private sector access to critical minerals, time could be Tshisekedi's biggest enemy.

President Trump is in business. He will choose the side that offers the best options for sustainable and long-term access to critical minerals and rare earth elements.