Africa's role in the global commodities economy: value creation, partnerships and geopolitical dynamics

A policy analysis in March 2026

Copper, cobalt, lithium, graphite: How Europe, America and China are competing for the continent – and why the crucial issue is not extraction, but value creation.

A look at projects and their geopolitical implications.

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Introduction

There is a phrase that was heard many times in Cape Town in February 2026 on panel discussions, in corridor conversations and during ministerial meetings: “Africa holds 30 per cent of the world’s mineral reserves”. Those who say it usually mean something other than what it sounds like. Not how rich Africa is, but how great the desire for its resources is. The “Investing in African Mining Indaba 2026” – the world’s largest mining investment conference – which saw record attendance this year, was no place for modesty. 13,000 delegates, ministers from a good dozen countries, CEOs of global corporations, representatives of the World Bank, the EU, the United Kingdom, the USA, China and numerous development finance institutions were in attendance.

Under the motto ‘Stronger Together: Progress through Partnerships’, there was much discussion. But beneath the rhetoric, another conference was taking place: one about power, pipelines, railway lines and the question of who ultimately reaps the corresponding profits. This analysis attempts to bring this second conference into focus. Not as an indictment, but as a supply chain map. The following questions guide the analysis:

Who is where? Who is building what? And which positions are still negotiable from an African perspective?

I. Why raw materials, why now?

The current surge is coming from two sides simultaneously. On the one hand, the energy transition is driving up demand for copper, cobalt, lithium, graphite, manganese and rare earths: battery cells, wind turbines, photovoltaics, grid infrastructure, data centres, electric vehicles – all these products rely on mineral-intensive components. On the other hand, the geopolitical shift after 2022 has made it clear that supply chains must be understood as strategic vulnerabilities. What used to be regarded as market logic is now security policy.

Africa is not merely “one option among many”. The continent holds a dominant share of key reserves. For instance, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) produces around 70 per cent of the world’s cobalt. And South Africa dominates the global market for platinum group metals.

Zimbabwe is Africa’s largest lithium producer. Zambia and the DRC together account for around one-sixth of the world’s copper production. Ghana, Guinea and Cameroon have significant bauxite deposits. Tanzania and the DRC are developing rare earths. The list goes on.

The problem is that whilst Africa holds these reserves, it barely participates in the value-added processes. According to estimates, the continent captures only around ten per cent of the value generated by its mineral exports. The rest – refining, further processing,

intermediate products, end products – takes place elsewhere, mostly in Asia and Europe. This is the starting point that was discussed at Mining Indaba 2026.

Africa's key raw materials at a glance (as of 2025/26)

- Cobalt: The DRC accounts for approx. 70% of global production and 71% of known reserves (S&P Global)
- Copper: The DRC and Zambia account for approx. 16% of global mine production
- Lithium: Zimbabwe is Africa's largest producer (1.1 million tonnes of concentrate exports in 2025)
- Graphite: Tanzania and Mozambique are emerging producers
- Manganese: South Africa is the world's leading producer
- Platinum group metals: South Africa accounts for around 80% of global primary supply
- Rare earths: Tanzania (Ngualla), DRC and Malawi have growing reserves

II. Mining Indaba 2026: What was really discussed

The official conference themes – partnerships, sustainability, shared growth – were not wrong. But it was something of a polite veneer over a more tangible and robust set of negotiating points. What distinguished Mining Indaba 2026 from previous conferences was that, for the first time, the debate centred on the global supply chain architecture, rather than merely on licensing issues and ESG standards.

Four strands can be identified here:

Financability before development. The dominant theme on the investment side was not which projects exist, but which of them are 'bankable', i.e. eligible for financing. Whilst traditional capital markets are acting more cautiously, public-private partnerships, development finance institutions (DFIs) and blended finance are coming to the fore as the main instruments here. The World Bank has announced that it will increase its support for the mining sector fivefold over the next five years – following around ten billion dollars over the past ten years.

Downstream buyers as new conference participants. For the first time, the involvement of downstream industries – car manufacturers, battery producers, electronics groups and defence electronics – was an explicit part of the programme. The message behind this is that value is not created solely through mining, but through off-take agreements and integration into processing.

The Junior Mining Exploration Fund. In Cape Town, the South African government launched an exploration fund with an initial allocation of 400 million rand and pledges totalling

two billion rand – signalling its intention to address the exploration gap in the country. In his statement at , Minerals Council CEO Mzila Mthenjane called for clear policy certainty and exploration investment as a prerequisite for any growth.

Is 'critical minerals' the right concept for Africa? This question was deliberately placed on the agenda by the Intergovernmental Forum on Mining (IGF). The debate: the traditional concept of criticality – that is, the strategic and systemic importance of raw materials – is defined from outside Africa, based on what others lack, not on what is systemically vital for African economies. Whilst this contradiction was not resolved, it was publicly acknowledged.

> *"Africa holds 30 per cent of the world's mineral reserves but captures only 10 per cent of the value generated from its exports. The question in 2026 is not how to extract more, but how to retain more."*
>
> The Diplomat, February 2026

CASE STUDIES

III. Four countries, four strategies

Concrete cases illustrate how global competition for raw materials plays out in everyday life. Each of these countries represents a different model – each with its own strengths, pitfalls and negotiating positions.

Democratic Republic of the Congo: A raw materials superpower without industrial returns

No country illustrates the paradox of Africa's resource wealth more starkly than the DRC. Africa's second-largest country by area produces around 70 per cent of the world's cobalt, ranks among the world's five largest copper suppliers and possesses significant reserves of lithium, coltan and gold. Its exports of copper and cobalt account for around 40 per cent of GDP. And yet it remains structurally underdeveloped.

The architecture of dependency has a name: Sicomines. In 2008, then-President Joseph Kabila and a Chinese state-owned consortium comprising Sinohydro and China Railway Group concluded what remains to this day Africa's largest raw materials and infrastructure deal.

Chinese firms received a 68 per cent stake in a cobalt-copper joint venture, as well as mining rights for 10 million tonnes of copper and 600,000 tonnes of cobalt over 25 years. In return, Beijing promised infrastructure: roads, bridges, hospitals, initially worth three billion dollars, and following renegotiations in 2024, seven billion dollars. To date, around $1.5 billion has been drawn down.

The outcome is sobering. An independent study commissioned by the Congolese EITI group described the deal in 2021 as causing ‘unprecedented damage in the history of the DRC’: undercapitalisation of mining rights, one-sided distribution of capital, and a failure to deliver infrastructure. CMOC subsidiary China Molybdenum produced over 61,000 tonnes of cobalt in the first half of 2025 alone – an increase of 13 per cent, even during a Congolese export ban.

This export ban was the most significant event of 2025: in February, the DRC had blocked all cobalt exports after prices had fallen to nine-year lows. Prices doubled within a few weeks. Kinshasa kept the tap turned off for eight months. When exports resumed in October, they came with quotas: 18,125 tonnes for the remainder of 2025, then 96,600 tonnes annually for 2026 and 2027 – significantly less than half of the 2024 output. Rarely in recent years has the African continent asserted its claim to mineral sovereignty as forcefully as it did at that moment.

This refers to a political and economic shift that can be observed simultaneously in many African countries. For decades, the prevailing model involved exporting raw materials – from copper and cobalt to bauxite and lithium – largely in unprocessed form. The actual value creation took place elsewhere: in refineries, smelters, battery factories or high-tech industries outside the continent. African countries thus often remained raw material suppliers in global supply chains whose strategic and technological centres were located in Europe, North America or, increasingly, in Asia.

The claim to mineral sovereignty aims precisely to change this structure. It means not only control over mineral resources in the traditional sense – that is, property rights, licences or production quotas – but above all the question of who controls value creation. Increasingly, governments today are demanding local processing, stakes in state-owned enterprises, technology transfer or industrial clusters centred around mining projects.

When African governments speak of mineral sovereignty today, it is therefore also an attempt to redefine the rules of the global commodities trade. It is about industrial development, jobs and the question of whether the continent can in future play a stronger role as a producer of intermediate goods, materials and technologies, rather than merely exporting raw materials.

Running in parallel is the geopolitical auction: the DRC has sent Washington a list of state-owned mining assets that would be eligible for American investment – a signal that Kinshasa is actively exploiting the competition between major powers. The aim is a ‘ ’ ‘Minerals for Security’ agreement, analogous to the Ukraine discussion: access to raw materials in exchange for security guarantees in the east of the country, where the M23 rebel group controls entire mining regions.

Furthermore, the debate in the DRC is now shifting not only regarding export quotas, state holdings and security architectures, but also the financing logic of the real economy. British International Investment (BII), the UK's development finance institution, has committed to providing Rawbank, the country's largest commercial bank, with a US$25 million financing facility in spring 2026. The objective is noteworthy because it deliberately does not focus on mining, but rather on those segments that often remain chronically underfunded in resource-rich economies: non-mineral companies, local corporations and small and medium-sized enterprises. This is precisely where the strategic relevance lies. If the DRC wishes to escape the classic resource curse, it is not enough to politically manage the export flows of cobalt and copper. At the same time, a resilient credit ecosystem is needed for local production, service providers, processing, logistics and supply chain structures. The fact that BII is working here alongside actors such as IFC, Proparco, the eco.business Fund and the OPEC Fund demonstrates how a new financial architecture is emerging in fragile markets: A purely donor-driven approach is increasingly being replaced by institutional risk-taking aimed at strengthening private value creation even outside the mining sector. For Kinshasa, this is politically almost as important as any renegotiation of a mining contract, because mineral sovereignty without functioning domestic financing ultimately remains a half-finished project.

Zambia: The comeback of the Copperbelt

Zambia is currently experiencing what its government is marketing as the 'Copper Comeback': since taking office in 2021, President Hakainde Hichilema has resolutely pursued investor-friendly reforms, restructured debt and brought back international mining companies. The Ministry of Finance forecasts copper production of over one million tonnes for 2026 – for the first time in decades. In the medium term, the figure is expected to reach 1.2 million tonnes.

The Lobito Corridor (see Section V) is not just a transport project for Zambia, but also a symbol of sovereignty: for the first time, the landlocked country would gain direct access to the Atlantic, independent of South African port and rail routes. The cooperation with the DRC, agreed in 2022 as a joint battery value chain, is an attempt to create an industrial cluster from two neighbouring countries. The risks are well known: an acid spill into the Kafue River in February 2025 – one of the largest industrial accidents in Zambia's history – and a further leak in November 2025 in the Lubumbashi region show that speed and governance capacity can diverge.

This momentum is now also being supported at an institutional level. As part of the 2026 EU-Zambia Partnership Dialogue, the European Union, together with the Zambian government, has once again focused the strategic pillars of their cooperation on infrastructure, capacity building, sustainable value chains and private-sector growth. What is noteworthy here is not so much the diplomatic form as the political thrust: the ' ' EU explicitly links its support for the Lobito Corridor to regulatory predictability, environmental standards, sustainable resource management and integration into larger regional trade areas such as COMESA and the AfCFTA. This is typical of the European approach. Unlike China, which primarily exerts its influence through built infrastructure and rapid implementation, Brussels seeks to define corridors simultaneously as spaces for governance and investment. For Zambia, this could

Digression: Governance under pressure to accelerate

The environmental incidents on the Kafue River and in the Lubumbashi area highlight a key structural problem of the African commodities boom: in many places, investment, production volumes and processing ambitions are growing faster than the state's regulatory and oversight capacities. Rising global demand for strategic minerals is increasing political pressure to approve projects swiftly and expand production. At the same time, environmental oversight, technical inspection, emergency management and the enforcement of liability require institutional strength, qualified personnel and reliable funding. Where this capacity-building lags behind economic momentum, a governance gap emerges. Mineral sovereignty is therefore not merely a question of control over resources, but also of the ability to manage their extraction in an environmentally, socially and regulatory effective manner.

be an advantage, provided that the combination of infrastructure, regulation, skills and private capital is actually translated into a broader industrial base. This also makes the employment logic more concrete. According to current industry estimates, the Zambian mining sector will already support more than 73,000 jobs by 2025; additional investments such as KoBold Metals' Mingomba project, Vedanta's involvement in Konkola Copper Mines or First Quantum's Kansanshi S3 expansion are likely to increase this figure further. The crucial question, however, is whether Africa is merely creating additional extraction jobs through this development, or whether investments along corridors and in further processing will also generate sustainable industrial employment with a steeper local learning curve. It is precisely this that will determine whether Zambia's 'Copper Comeback' is indeed an industrial policy comeback.

Zimbabwe: The radical attempt at value creation

On 25 February 2026, Zimbabwe's Minister of Mines, Polite Kambamura, announced one of the most far-reaching resource policy decisions on the continent: an immediate and indefinite export ban on all raw mineral and lithium concentrate exports. This brought forward by ten months a regulation originally planned for January 2027.

The figures behind the decision: Zimbabwe is Africa's largest lithium producer and exported over 1.1 million tonnes of spodumene concentrate in 2025 – almost exclusively to China, where it is refined into battery-grade lithium carbonate or lithium hydroxide. The price of raw concentrate is $570 per tonne. Battery-grade lithium carbonate fetches up to $22,000 per tonne. This twelve-fold price gap is the economic rationale behind the export ban.

The reaction was immediate: lithium carbonate futures on the Guangzhou Futures Exchange jumped by over six per cent. Analysts expect a price rise of 15 to 25 per cent for lithium

concentrates in the second quarter of 2026. China's dependence is undeniable: in 2025, Zimbabwe supplied around 15 per cent of China's total lithium imports.

It remains to be seen whether the experiment will succeed. Zimbabwe has a chronic energy deficit of over 1,000 MW – yet lithium processing is highly energy-intensive. Although Chinese firms (Zhejiang Huayou Cobalt, Sinomine, Chengxin Lithium, Yahua) have pledged around $900 million for local processing plants; the large-scale facilities will not come on stream until 2026 or later. Zimbabwe's gamble: short-term pain, long-term structural change. The model is the policy shifts in Indonesia (nickel) and Indonesia's experience of actually forcing the development of local refining capacity through export bans.

> *"The price gap tells the story: raw spodumene concentrate at $570 per tonne. Battery-grade lithium carbonate at over $22,000. Zimbabwe has decided that exporting the difference is no longer acceptable."*
>
> Analysis: Mining South East Europe, February 2026

Namibia and the wave of export bans

Zimbabwe is not an isolated case. Namibia banned the bulk export of unprocessed ores in 2023. Malawi blocked all raw mineral exports in October 2025. At least 13 African countries have introduced or tightened export restrictions since 2023. This is a political movement, not a coincidence.

South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa has repeatedly stated this goal publicly: Africa must stop exporting cheap raw materials and importing expensive finished products. This is easier said than done in structural terms – but it marks a shift in the political climate.

Nigeria demonstrates that this value-added logic is not limited to southern Africa or to battery minerals. There, the Africa Finance Corporation (AFC) and the state-owned Solid Minerals Development Fund (SMDF) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding on three interlinked projects: an aluminium refinery with an investment volume of around 1.3 billion US dollars, a geoscientific mapping programme, and a joint strategic investment vehicle for exploration and development projects. The aluminium component is particularly relevant. For decades, Africa's role in the bauxite and aluminium complex was often limited to the export of raw materials or intermediate products; Nigeria is now attempting to make the leap into capital-intensive processing. The planned project is to operate using a modern Bayer process and its own gas-based combined heat and power generation, is designed to run for around 20 years and, according to the institutions involved, will make significant contributions to

GDP, foreign exchange earnings and industrial employment. It remains to be seen whether these projections will be fully realised. Politically, however, the case is nonetheless pivotal: it demonstrates that ‘value addition’ in Africa is increasingly being treated not merely as a normative buzzword, but as a major industrial policy project with concrete financing mechanisms, regulatory support and a government commitment to accelerate its implementation. This is precisely where the difference lies between rhetoric and industrial strategy.

Geopolitics and supply chains

IV. Three Powers, Three Methods

The global competition for Africa’s minerals is shaped by three players who bring not only different amounts of capital to the table, but also fundamentally different approaches: Europe focuses on standards and bankability, China on system integration and speed, and the US on corridors and geopolitical diversification. The result is a three-way contest in which Africa is both object and – increasingly – subject.

The European Union: Standards as Gatekeeping

Brussels no longer acts primarily on moral grounds when it comes to raw materials, but rather on the basis of supply policy. The aim: access-secured, ESG-compliant supply chains for European battery cell manufacturing, wind energy, grid infrastructure and defence electronics. The instrument for this is called ‘Global Gateway’ – an infrastructure and investment programme explicitly designed to counter China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In practice, this means: EIB Global provides early-stage project support – engineering studies, environmental and social risk assessments, feasibility analyses, and integration into European battery value chains. Andrada Mining (tin and lithium) and EcoGraf (graphite) are each receiving up to two million euros in technical assistance per project. What sounds harmless is structurally significant: whoever defines the studies and standards influences how a project is set up – and which buyers it ultimately ‘suits’.

At Mining Indaba 2026, the EU was represented, among others, by the European Partnership for Responsible Minerals (EPRM), which brought an interactive experiential project on cobalt mining in the DRC to Cape Town. This, too, serves a purpose: European ESG requirements are being introduced into the market as an awareness and compliance agenda – thereby creating barriers for suppliers who do not meet these standards.

United Kingdom: Impact Finance and SME ecosystems

Alongside setting standards, London is placing a strong emphasis on financial architecture. The most significant announcement at Mining Indaba 2026 was the establishment of a joint Impact Finance Facility with Anglo American – two million pounds sterling, provided by the Impact Finance Network, to provide capital to small and medium-sized enterprises in South Africa. The aim: to mobilise at least three times that amount in private follow-on investment, create 5,000 new jobs and strengthen SMEs as the backbone of the mining supply chain.

The bigger picture behind this is the UK Critical Minerals Strategy, which the British Prime Minister presented at the G20 summit in Johannesburg: diversified, resilient supply chains, underpinned by long-term partnerships with Africa – and by British expertise in engineering, e , financial services, ESG auditing and traceability systems. This combination of capital and professional services represents the UK's niche positioning in a market where neither the sheer size of the EU nor China's full integration can be replicated.

The fact that London is not limiting this approach to South Africa is demonstrated by the BII's $25 million facility for Rawbank in the DRC: the UK is thus visibly seeking not only to secure access to raw materials, but also to strengthen financial intermediation in those markets where the lack of long-term capital has hitherto held back any broader industrialisation.

The US: Minerals as security policy

Washington's engagement has taken on a new dimension since 2023 – and a second Trump administration casts a large question mark over it. Under President Biden, the strategy was clear: the Lobito Corridor as a blueprint for G7-backed infrastructure as a counter-model to the BRI, combined with the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGI) as a multilateral financing framework.

The current signals are more contradictory. A large US delegation was present at the Mining Indaba 2026 – with a clear focus on governance, transparency and procurement requirements as preconditions for investment. At the same time, negotiations are underway with the DRC on a 'Minerals for Security' agreement, which exchanges access to minerals for security support. Whether this can be structured within an 'America First' framework remains to be seen. What is clear is that the US has recognised that critical minerals are not an economic issue, but a strategic security issue.

China: The system integrator

China is not just one investor among many in this field. It is the backbone of the global supply chain. The figures are astonishing: China controls over 50 per cent of global mineral production; if all stages of processing are taken into account, the figure rises to 87 per cent. In refining and processing, the figures range from 60 to 95 per cent, depending on the mineral. Chinese policy banks granted BRI-linked mining loans totalling 24.9 billion dollars in the first half of 2025 alone – a record.

In Africa, this operates via a tried-and-tested model: access to raw materials in exchange for infrastructure. The Sicomines deal in the DRC is the best-known example, but by no means the only one. In Mali, the Goulamina lithium mine was secured in 2024; in Botswana, the Khoemacau copper mine in 2023; and in Tanzania, the Ngualla rare-earths mine in 2025. Chinese state-owned enterprises, private companies and policy banks control everything that other players could not finance: long-term risks in politically unstable countries.

The strategic core lies in the midstream: in the stages of refining, chemical processing and battery pre-production, China has built up significant economies of scale and learning curve advantages that cannot be matched within a decade. Whoever controls the midstream controls pricing formulas and market access, and decides whether African concentrates are exported or industrial depth is built up.

The downside is becoming increasingly apparent: the acid spill at Sino Metals Leach Zambia into Zambia's Kafue River in February 2025, environmental breaches in West Africa, and a lack of transparency regarding contract terms. In the DRC, public pressure for renegotiation is growing. Kinshasa has already increased the share of state-owned companies in joint ventures; a rise from 32 to 70 per cent in the Sinohydro venture is under discussion.

Key player	Main instrument	Where the margin remains
EU	Standards, ESG, technical assistance, Global Gateway	Financing fees, processing margins, OEM integration
UK	Impact Finance, SME ecosystems, traceability	Professional Services, Financial Architecture
USA	Corridors, DFI loans, governance requirements	Geopolitical control, offtake positioning
China	End-to-end: infrastructure, construction, refinery, off-take	Midstream, EPC margins, technology lock-in
Africa	Mining, primary processing, increasing export bans	Royalties, wages, still in its infancy: processing margins

Infrastructure and industrial policy

V. Corridors: More than just railways

A corridor is not a railway line. It is industrial policy. Whoever designs the railways, electricity, customs and border clearance along a route helps decide where processing plants are built, where clusters emerge, and where value is retained. That is why there is such a fierce battle over corridors, particularly in Africa.

The Lobito Corridor: Africa's most important infrastructure project

In 2023, a test shipment was loaded for the first time from the Kamoa-Kakula complex in Kolwezi onto the rehabilitated Benguela Railway heading towards the Atlantic: around 1,100 tonnes of copper concentrate were transported via the Impala Terminal facility in Port of Lobito. It was a 'milestone', as founder Robert Friedland said, and a symbol.

The Lobito Corridor connects the Angolan Atlantic port of Lobito via 1,344 kilometres of the Benguela Railway to the DRC border, then a further 400 kilometres into the Congolese Copperbelt to Kolwezi. The planned extension runs through Zambia's North-Western and Copperbelt provinces to Chingola, creating a rail corridor almost 3,000 kilometres long.

The financing framework is impressive: multilateral investments totalling over ten billion dollars, backed by the US, the EU, the African Development Bank and private consortia. The US alone has pledged over four billion dollars – including a 553-million-dollar direct loan from the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) to the Lobito Atlantic Railway consortium, comprising Trafigura, Mota-Engil and the Belgian rail operator Vecturis. The EU describes the project as a 'Global Gateway Flagship'. Joe Biden visited Angola in December 2024 – the first time in many years that a sitting US president had visited Africa.

As of early March 2026: The Angolan section of the line is being upgraded, with the frequency increased from once a month to twice a week. Since 2025, Ivanhoe has been transporting 240,000 tonnes of copper from the Kamoa-Kakula complex via the corridor. The DRC section (Dilolo-Kolwezi) is currently operating at just 10 to 15 kilometres per hour and at less than five per cent capacity.

A World Bank feasibility study was completed in September 2025, and Kinshasa's Ministry of Finance applied for a $500 million loan from the World Bank in October 2025. The Zambian section – 515 kilometres of new construction – is in the tendering phase; the ground-breaking ceremony was scheduled for early 2026.

Geopolitically, the corridor is far more than just logistics. In November 2025, China signed a $1.4 billion agreement with Zambia and Tanzania for the modernisation of the TAZARA railway (Dar es Salaam to the Copperbelt), a direct counter-move.

The interpretation: what the West is building with Lobito towards the Atlantic, China is complementing towards the Indian Ocean. African governments are deliberately playing both options off against each other to maximise foreign investment and their own influence.

Lobito Corridor: Figures & Status (February 2026)

Total length: approx. 1,344 km in Angola + 400 km in the DRC + 515 km in Zambia (new construction)
Total funding: over USD 10 billion (USA, EU, AfDB, private)
US DFC direct loan: USD 553 million to Lobito Atlantic Railway (finalised Dec. 2025)
DRC section: EU/US feasibility study Sept. 2025, World Bank loan application Oct. 2025
Zambia section: Feasibility study completed, contractor tender process ongoing
First test shipment: 2023 (Kamoa-Kakula, Ivanhoe Mines, 1,100 tonnes of copper concentrate)
Planned regular operations: 240,000 t copper/year from 2025 (Ivanhoe guidance)
Competition: China-Tanzania TAZARA modernisation (USD 1.4 billion, Nov. 2025)

However, the corridor debate would be too narrow if it were limited solely to ports, railways and border regimes. The second, often underestimated corridor is energy. Without a reliable and competitive electricity supply, refining, smelting, chemical processing and modern industrial clusters would come to nothing. South Africa provides an instructive example of this.

The Naos-1 project, a privately financed hybrid venture combining solar energy and battery storage, has reached financial close and is set to supply electricity to Sasol and Air Liquide from 2028 under a 25-year private power purchase agreement. The project plans for 300 MW of solar capacity and 855 MWh of battery storage; according to the developers, the electricity is expected to be significantly cheaper than current Eskom tariffs whilst offering greater security of supply during peak periods.

For the debate on raw materials and processing, this is more than just an energy market issue. It shows that industrial competitiveness in Africa will in future depend not solely on deposits, export regimes or investor interest, but on the ability to provide energy as a predictable, cost-effective industrial infrastructure. Anyone discussing local processing must therefore discuss electricity. The real bottleneck for many value-added strategies is not the will to industrialise, but the question of whether electricity is available in sufficient quantities, at predictable prices and with adequate grid stability.

TAZARA, Nacala and the other corridors

The Lobito Corridor is arguably the best-known project, but not the only one. The Nacala Corridor system in Mozambique and Malawi connects the port of Nacala with the mining regions of both countries and is significant as a model for agri-food and mineral exports. The Beira Corridor connects Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi with the Mozambican port of Beira and, despite improvements in capacity, remains hampered by governance issues.

What all these corridors have in common is that they are not merely transport projects. They are infrastructure policy decisions regarding the regional division of labour. Who controls the port, who harmonises customs processes, who provides energy supplies along the route – these factors determine whether minerals leave the corridor as raw materials or as intermediate products. Duncan Wanblad, CEO of Anglo American, summed this up at the Mining Indaba: value creation arises from intelligent allocation along regionally integrated corridors – not from every country replicating every stage of the supply chain.

Analysis

VI. The real power dynamics

When the four sections are brought together – country case studies, power players and corridor logic – a picture emerges that justifies neither euphoria nor resignation, but highlights clear areas for action.

The asymmetrical contract

In many real-world scenarios, the division of labour looks like this: Africa explores, mines and processes. Europe and the US finance, insure, set standards and integrate into OEM supply chains. China refines, chemically processes and rapidly builds infrastructure. This contract is not necessarily unfair – but it is asymmetrical. The highest margins, the greatest control over pricing and the decisive learning curves lie outside Africa.

The concept of ‘criticality’ makes this tangible. When the Global North defines minerals as ‘critical’ according to its own logic of scarcity – that is, based on what it lacks – it implicitly sets the agenda. South Africa’s CAMVaC has developed its own Linkage-Based Criticality Matrix for this purpose: it does not ask what others lack, but what holds its own industrial system together. Under this logic, coal remains systemically relevant in the short term (electricity, jobs, industry), whilst manganese is positioned as a strategic successor for the new battery chemistry.

> *"If the West focuses solely on ESG, studies and risk, but neglects speed, infrastructure, offtakes and midstream, it will lose influence. Africa will then, quite naturally, choose the player that delivers."*
>
> Mining Indaba 2026, summary by Western observers

South Africa's exploration problem: the cadastre as a bottleneck

The harshest truth is administrative. South Africa – once the undisputed anchor of African mining – is slipping in global exploration attractiveness rankings. The reason: slow, unpredictable approval processes, an outdated digital cadastre system, and regulatory uncertainty. Mining Minister Gwede Mantashe publicly acknowledged the problem at the Mining Indaba. The Minerals Council has declared policy certainty and cadastre modernisation to be its top priorities.

The cadastre – or the interplay of surveying, cadastral records and the Deeds Registry is central to the mining industry in South Africa, because mining projects can only be made bankable, obtainable and conflict-free if it is clearly established who owns which areas, where the legal property boundaries lie and which easements/rights of use (access roads, utility lines, water rights, wayleaves) already exist. In practice, however, this formal system frequently clashes with informal or traditional land rights (particularly in former homelands and peri-urban areas), meaning that a purely 'clean' set of documents does not automatically guarantee that a project will be accepted locally: For mining companies, the clarity of land and usage rights determines exploration access, site and route planning, ESG and social risks, compensation and resettlement issues, as well as whether investors and insurers will support the project at all. In short: without reliable, consistent cadastral/title data, geology very quickly turns into legal, time and reputational risk.

The impact on the supply chain is immediate: without a functioning exploration and licensing system, there is no stable project pipeline. Without a pipeline, corridors and processing facilities remain underutilised. Investors then go where the pipeline is stable – to Zambia, Namibia, the DRC and Mozambique.

Ten levers for African negotiating strength

If the analysis is correct – that Africa's positions are still negotiable but time-limited – then an agenda for the coming years emerges. It has nothing to do with ideology, but with structural supply chain policy:

Corridor governance: Harmonised customs processes, electricity pools, border clearance between neighbouring states – as a location decision for processing.

Bankability packages: Feasibility studies, ESG, community agreements, water/waste management as prerequisites for financial viability.

Offtake mechanisms: Risk-sharing between producers and buyers to ensure processing investments are profitable.

Domestic linkages: Measurable local content quotas, SME programmes, skills transfer, local procurement obligations with contractual commitments.

Cadastre & data quality: Digital, reliable licensing systems as a basis for pipelines.

Selective export bans: As demonstrated by Zimbabwe, Namibia and Malawi – as a tool to enforce local processing capacities.

Regional industrial clusters: Not individual countries, but the Copperbelt approach: DRC + Zambia as a battery value chain.

Great power arbitrage: Deliberately playing off competition between China, the EU and the US – not as a policy of loyalty, but as a negotiating strategy.

Defining one's own strategic key role (crime): African countries should define what is systemically sustainable – not just what others lack.

Midstream as a bargaining chip: Locate refining and chemical processing where energy, water and governance make it possible – and incorporate this as a condition in deals.

VII. Architect or raw materials supplier?

After four days of Mining Indaba 2026, following the DRC's cobalt export shock, following Zimbabwe's lithium ban three days before this conclusion, following the Lobito Corridor as an emblematic construction project of a new geopolitics – what remains?

Firstly: Africa will no longer accept being treated merely as an object of Western or Chinese supply security logic. The export bans are not the whim of individual governments; they are structural signals. The continent is attempting to move up the value chain. This is possible – but difficult, costly and risky.

Secondly: In this phase, the Global North is primarily a supply chain architect. It provides capital, standards, technical feasibility and market access – and thereby sets the rules of the game according to which projects become 'financeable'. This is no conspiracy; it is the normal logic of the capital market. But it means that Africa's governments must be aware of these rules and actively negotiate them, rather than merely complying with them.

Thirdly: China is a systems integrator, not a benefactor. It delivers speed and full integration – but creates dependencies. The question is not whether to work with China, but under what conditions: with measurable local content quotas, skills transfer, processing within the corridor and transparency in contracts.

Fourthly, and crucially: value creation does not arise from rhetoric. It arises from governance, from corridor infrastructure, from exploration pipelines, from bankability structures – and from the political will to negotiate deals in such a way that what remains is not just royalties and mining jobs, but industrial know-how.

The raw materials lie in the ground. The question is who sets the terms for their exploitation. Mining Indaba 2026 has shown that this question is being asked. The answer remains open. The interesting signals of 2026 therefore come not only from export bans and corridor projects, but also from the depths of the financial and energy architecture: from SME credit lines in the DRC, from alumina plans in Nigeria, from privately financed electricity solutions in South Africa, and from European support for Zambian reform and corridor policies. Only when these levels interact will raw materials policy begin to translate into real industrial transformation.

Sources & Background: *Mining Indaba 2026 (Agenda, IGF, Minerals Council, UK Government, World Bank); The Diplomat Feb. 2026; Africa Center for Strategic Studies Dec. 2025; Bloomberg/Bloomberg Intelligence May 2025; New America Feb. 2026; OECD Lobito Corridor Background Note Apr. 2025; IPIS Research Dec. 2025; Al Jazeera/Reuters Feb. 2026; Africa Report Jan. 2026; AidData Feb. 2025; Mirage News Feb. 2026; EBC Financial Group Feb. 2026.*