Atlantic Council

AFRICA CENTER

Beyond critical minerals

Capitalizing on the DRC’s vast opportunities

Atlantic Council

AFRICA CENTER

Launched in 2022, the **Africa Center**'s programming on the DRC seeks to advise on securing the country's governance and to raise awareness of the economic opportunities in the DRC. In partnership with Rawbank, the Africa Center analyzes the DRC's business environment, the industrial potential of its critical minerals, and peace and security throughout the country.

Please direct inquiries to:

Atlantic Council
1400 L Street NW, 11th Floor
Washington, DC 20005

June 2025

Preface

The mineral-rich Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is in the spotlight. But that light reveals a complicated picture. As the Rwandan-backed M23 paramilitary has seized control of large swaths of eastern Congo and the race for access to critical minerals accelerates—with the United States negotiating a minerals-for-peace deal and China leveraging its minerals-for-infrastructure agreement since 2007—this report is a unique collection of perspectives, reflecting the complexity of a vast country too often reduced to its critical minerals.

Although the mining sector is undoubtedly key to its economy and its trading partnerships, the DRC covers a much larger scope of undermined opportunities from agriculture to financial services, infrastructure projects to hydropower. With them, the DRC has a chance to build roads, power grids, health infrastructure, and more that will sustain a democratic, economically growing country in the years ahead.

To see beyond the critical minerals, the Atlantic Council convened a group of six high-level authors covering various dimensions of Congolese challenges and opportunities.

- **Dave Peterson**, former senior director, Africa Program, National Endowment for Democracy
- **Mvemba Phezo Dizolele**, senior fellow and director, Africa Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies
- **Rabah Areki**, distinguished fellow, Freedom and Prosperity Center, Atlantic Council
- **Thomas De Dreux-Brézé**, director of strategy development, Rawbank
- **Nicole Namwezi Batumike**, gender and responsible sourcing specialist, Panzi Foundation
- **Calixte Ahokpossi**, mission chief, Democratic Republic of the Congo, International Monetary Fund

These writers analyze how the DRC—and its partners—can take this transformative path, secure its territory, and prepare a better future for its citizens.

Ambassador Rama Yade
Senior director, Africa Center,
Atlantic Council

The business case for peace and democracy in the DRC is strong

Dave Peterson is the former senior director of the Africa Program of the National Endowment for Democracy.

The Rwandan-backed rebel militia M23 has seized control of most of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) while the national army (known by its French acronym, FARDC) and international peacekeepers retreat. At least seven thousand civilians have been killed and thousands more raped. Two million displaced persons and refugees are fleeing for safety, joining some five million already displaced. The US embassy in Kinshasa has been attacked by angry mobs—and both strategic interests and American values are at stake.

The DRC is rich. With 111 million inhabitants in a geographical area the size of Europe, the country is blessed (or cursed) by $24 trillion in mineral resources such as copper, cobalt, lithium, gold, and diamonds, much of it crucial to the world's transition to electric power, half of it exported to China, and much of it now controlled by Chinese investors. Congo has the world's largest tropical forests after the Amazon and a vast river network that could power half the African continent; it also has enormous agricultural potential, gas, and oil.

And the DRC is where the greatest slaughter of human beings since World War II occurred just thirty years ago, even as atrocities continue to be reported daily in the country's east. In addition to M23, more than a hundred militia groups terrorize the population. Rampant corruption sucks billions of dollars from the economy every year, and poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and disease statistics place the DRC near the bottom of global rankings.

The Congolese people have begged for change. Democratic elections held on December 20, 2023, were won by the incumbent, Felix Tshisekedi. Although flawed in many respects, credible domestic observation groups, supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and others, concluded they reflected the will of the people. The elections were reasonably competitive and peaceful, a notable achievement compared to Congo's nine neighbors, many among the most autocratic countries in the world. The elections raised the level of political discourse and further cultivated Congo's democratic practice. Congo's press is relatively free, so citizens can debate, organize, and criticize their government. The nation's civil society is extensive, active, and skilled—advocating, educating, and mobilizing citizens on a host of issues.

Yet after another year in power, the second Tshisekedi administration has failed to resolve the conflict in the east, address rampant corruption, or improve governance. The human rights record is not reassuring, as NED's Congolese partners and others have documented. More than one hundred *kuluna*, purportedly youth gang members ensnared by DRC's notoriously corrupt justice system, were recently executed after the government reinstated the death penalty. Freedom of expression is also under pressure as activists, journalists, and whistleblowers are attacked and fear for their personal safety. Meanwhile, the president seems intent on tampering with the constitution to allow him to extend his term in office.

The mining companies, banks, and tech industry—aware of but loath to abandon the bloody supply chain they rely on—profit handsomely from Congo's precious minerals. Although the conflict in the country's east is about more than the trade in minerals, and international funders have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the problem, the DRC's best hope may be for foreign investors to mobilize pressure on the belligerents to make peace. The Belgian government has investigated Apple for tolerating human rights abuses in its supply chain originating in the DRC, and Apple has acknowledged the difficulty of identifying the sources of its suppliers. Because this is an issue for the entire industry, companies should find it advantageous, both in terms of public relations as well as in creating a conducive business environment, to be more accountable for the stability and prosperity of the communities from which they derive their wealth.

The Trump administration is paying attention. Tenuous negotiations between representatives of the Congolese and Rwandan governments led by the administration's special envoy Massad Boulos may be making progress. To buttress this, Congolese civil society should be included in the process, including appropriate NGOs, community groups, the church, labor, and business, as proved successful in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue two decades ago. The DRC's democratic aspirations should be the United States' comparative advantage. The United States made mistakes in Congo, then called Zaire, during the Cold War, to the detriment of its own reputation, and it would be a shame to return to that era of zero-sum geopolitical competition. Security, strength, and prosperity are interests every nation pursues, but the United States can do better. Many Congolese, including civil society and political leaders, still see the United States as a force for good and a beacon of hope for ideals such as freedom, peace, democracy, justice, and human rights. It is what makes America strong: It is what makes the United States friends and allies, accords America respect and admiration—to be seen as a world leader rather than just another player, a model rather than a pariah.

The US private sector should take the lead. A golden age cannot be built on the blood of innocents, a course that can only lead to more hatred and suffering and will ultimately fail. The international business community must unite in committing to resource extraction practices that abide by international standards of human rights and transparency, incentivize the rival governments and factions in the subregion to lay down their arms, and make it easier and more profitable for companies to do their work. The private sector can rally international public opinion and pave the way for stability and prosperity. The long-suffering Congolese people deserve it.

Congo's war and the critical minerals scramble are inextricably intertwined

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele is a senior fellow and director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC.

For the past thirty years, the world has viewed the Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo) through a binary lens of conflict and the exploitation of natural and mineral resources. The conflict optics magnify the insecurity that has characterized life in the eastern provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri. The protracted conflict between Congo and Rwanda spawned the proliferation of militias, including the two iterations of the Rwanda-backed M23, which captured the Congolese cities of Goma and Bukavu on January 25, 2025, and February 16, 2025, respectively. The death toll is estimated at more than seven thousand since January 2025, with unofficial reports from the region suggesting a much higher number of victims.

With 7.8 million internally displaced people, Congo ranks alongside Syria and Sudan among countries with the largest displaced populations, according to the United Nations. Of the more than two million people who have been displaced since the 2022 resurgence of M23, one million were displaced in 2024. Sexual violence, disappearances, and other human rights abuses have increased in M23-occupied areas. These abuses will continue as the rebels expand their territorial control.

Coverage of the conflict has also emphasized the role of natural and mineral resources as drivers of the war. Congo's resource endowment is valued at a staggering $24 trillion. Analyses of the war have focused on the looting and smuggling of minerals, and have pointed to Rwanda and Uganda as primary beneficiaries. The two countries have emerged as major exporters of minerals, such as gold and coltan, of which they have limited reserves.

Recently, heightened interest in Congo's mineral resources has been driven, among other reasons, by the West's determination to circumvent China and secure critical resources like cobalt, copper, and lithium. For instance, on February 18, 2024, the European Union (EU) signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Sustainable Raw Materials Value Chains with Rwanda. Even though the EU signed similar memoranda with Congo, Zambia, and Namibia, Rwanda's case raised questions given the country's troubled history with Congo concerning mineral resources. This history includes invading Congo, arming violent rebel groups, and smuggling minerals out of rebel-controlled territory.

The second element driving high-profile interest in the country's mineral wealth is the Trump administration's classification of critical minerals as vital to US national security. The pursuit of a US-Congo minerals-for-security deal underscores Washington's increased interest in Congo's mineral endowment. As the world waits to learn about the contours and substance of the contract and what the United States will offer Kinshasa, it's worth taking stock of the current foreign investment landscape in the country.

China tops the list of major investors with important financial and technical commitments to Congo's mining sector. Besides China, the other major players who have established significant footprints in the country include the EU and the United States.

China leads in the mining and infrastructure sectors

China's investments in DRC focus on the mining sector, with major stakes in the cobalt and copper industries. The engagement stems from the 2008 Sicomines joint venture between Chinese companies (Sinohydro and China Railway Engineering Corporation) and the Congolese government. The venture is the foundation of the Congo-China cooperation. Originally valued at $9 billion, the deal is a minerals-for-infrastructure barter. After pushback from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and Congolese civil society organizations, the deal was renegotiated to $6 billion in 2009. In exchange for mining rights, China has financed infrastructure projects, including roads and hospitals. In 2024, Chinese infrastructure investment commitments were valued at $7 billion. Today, China is the largest investor in the country.

United States seeks minerals for national security

Until the advent of the second Trump administration, the United States showed little interest in DRC minerals and focused on the humanitarian challenges of the country. Western companies that secured mining deals often sold their holdings to the Chinese. With every Western business divestment, the Chinese increased their stake in Congo's mining sector. The new policy change has generated interest for greater US-Congo cooperation. This minerals-focused change is supported by a robust diplomatic engagement that seeks to broker peace between Congo and Rwanda. The administration's stated objective is to stabilize Congo and create the right conditions for investments in mining and infrastructure.

The new US approach is yielding early results. On May 6, 2025, California-based KoBold Metals and Australia-based AVZ Minerals reached an agreement for the former to acquire AVZ Minerals' interests in the Manono lithium deposit in Congo. Billionaires Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos back KoBold. The agreement will enable the company to invest over one billion dollars to develop the lithium project.

It is difficult to evaluate the level of current US investments in Congo. US pledges of multi-billion-dollar investments depend on the promises of peace accords between Rwanda and Congo and related bilateral mineral agreements.

European Union focuses on ethical approach to critical minerals

European countries' approach in Congo focuses on ethical sourcing and sustainability, which also include traceability of minerals due to armed conflict. European development banks have funded projects that improve governance and reduce poverty. Some of these initiatives, however, have faced criticism. For instance, in light of the resurgence of M23, the February 18, 2024, memorandum the EU signed with Rwanda—"establishing close cooperation with Rwanda" on the sourcing of critical minerals—has raised questions about the EU's commitment to ethical sourcing, given that Rwanda backs the violent M23 paramilitary group. Analysts of the Great Lakes region, diplomats, and members of the European Parliament have all questioned and challenged the intent and effect of the memorandum. Some see it as a driver of the re-emergence of the M23 and the current war between Congo and Rwanda.

Top European investors in Congo include France, the Netherlands, and Italy, who contributed a combined foreign direct investment stock of approximately $32.6 billion in 2022.

As the scramble for critical minerals enters a new phase with increased US interest in Congo, the country needs effective governance and transparent policies to ensure that foreign investments contribute to sustainable development and economic growth.

Comparative overview of investments

Country/Region	Key sectors	Notable investments
China	Mining, infrastructure	Sicomines Joint Venture, $7 billion in infrastructure
United States	Mining, diplomacy	KoBold Metals' $1 billion in Manono project
European Union	Mining, development	€424 million grants to the partnership with the DRC (2021-24)

Critical minerals won't transform lives in the DRC—a radical shift in security and economic governance will

Rabah Arezki is a distinguished fellow at the Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Center. He previously served as chief economist and vice president for economic governance and knowledge management at the African Development Bank, as well as chief economist for the Middle East and North Africa region at the World Bank, and as chief of the commodities unit in the research department at the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The Democratic Republic of Congo's abundance of critical minerals has given rise to comparisons with Saudi Arabia's oil wealth. But that abundance has not improved citizens' lives in one of the poorest countries in the world. Yet there is a course that could make that possible: finding the right balance between openness to investments from multinational corporations and economic sovereignty—broadly defined as the ability of a country to control its own economic system.

The DRC is the repository of the world's largest reserves of critical minerals such as cobalt, copper, and lithium. Indeed, the DRC holds around 70 percent and 60 percent of the world's cobalt and lithium reserves, respectively, as well significant deposits of nickel and uranium, which are metal components for energy generation and batteries for electric vehicles. Yet the DRC encapsulates the seemingly insurmountable and intertwined challenges posed by critical minerals. These challenges are tied to geopolitics, conflicts, and the environment as well as economic and social dimensions.

First and foremost, the challenge facing the DRC is the new geopolitics around critical minerals. The demand for critical minerals is exploding. According to the International Energy Agency, demand for minerals is projected to increase by more than four times by 2040 amid the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy. Major powers—namely China, the United States, and the European Union—are engaged in a technological race spurring competition for access to these critical minerals. At the center of that global scramble is the DRC, which is being courted by these powers like never before. China is heavily invested in the mining sector of the DRC and controls the supply chains of critical minerals, including their processing.

Amid the technological race, China has recently imposed restrictions on exports of critical minerals to the United States. Washington and Brussels have tried to challenge Beijing's monopoly of the supply chains of these minerals by attempting to secure mining contracts, including in the DRC. That competition should in principle help the DRC to not only get a fair share from the mining contracts but also the opportunity to move up the value chain. In practice, multinational corporations and foreign governments have much stronger capacity in negotiating mining contracts relative to the government of the DRC. Quid pro quos are also common involving the receipt of aid packages originating from self-interested donor countries in exchange for the awarding of mining contracts to multinational corporations—linked to donors.

Another major challenge for the DRC is conflict. The DRC is faced with external and internal conflicts. The DRC has a complex history: Once known as the Belgian Congo, it experienced a cruel form of colonization as the de facto personal property of Leopold II, Belgium's king. The DRC's post-independence era was plagued by direct interventions by foreign powers and autocratic rulers. That history helps explain the DRC's deficient institutions, a persistent low level of trust among citizens, and distrust between the citizenry and the government.

The DRC has long faced massive violence and crimes in mineral-rich provinces such as Katanga and North Kivu—fueled by neighbors such as Rwanda and Uganda. The advances of Rwanda-backed M23 rebels in eastern Congo is alarming for the DRC and could fuel a "major continental conflict." The Trump administration is actively pushing for a peace deal between the DRC and Rwanda to end the violence. This peace deal appears to be contingent upon the two countries each signing a bilateral economic agreement with the United States involving mineral extraction and processing. The peace negotiations are at an early stage, but these efforts are welcome especially if they lead to an outcome perceived as just.

Minerals are routinely smuggled out of the DRC. Add to that illicit artisanal mining—mining done, generally on a small scale and with low-tech tools, by individuals not employed by a mining company—as a tug of war between the authorities and citizens directly grabbing minerals. As a vast territory, it is imperative for the DRC to expand and strengthen the governance of its security sector to secure its borders and confront armed groups operating on its territory. The DRC is nominally a centralized republic, and it needs to find the right balance for revenue sharing between the different provinces and the central government to reduce internal tensions.

Further, the extraction of critical minerals is leading to significant environmental and health hazards. Indeed, extraction is often associated with deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and the use of toxic chemicals (including mercury), which are polluting ground water sources. Add to that child labor in the extraction of critical minerals, with children and women facing health degradation and abuse. The weak enforcement of environmental and social standards in the DRC is very concerning. A global debate is raging over the boycott of critical minerals emanating from zones of conflicts and forced labor. These boycotts alone are unlikely to sway the DRC's government to do right by its citizens, but multinational corporations and foreign governments may be more susceptible to pressure.

These multifaceted challenges may seem insurmountable, but that should not deter the government of the DRC. To confront these challenges, the DRC must find a balance between outward- and inward-facing institutions. On the outward-facing front, the government needs to get its fair share of revenues from the extraction of minerals and attract investment in processing domestically. To do so, the government needs to deploy utmost transparency in its dealing with multinational corporations and foster the right human capital to match the capacity on the other side.

On the inward-facing front, the DRC needs to also ensure it is redistributing the proceeds of the revenues from the extraction of critical minerals to its citizens to ensure economic justice. To do so, the government of DRC needs to improve the allocative and technical efficiency of its spending. The government of DRC should pursue further its local content policy (designed to ensure that extractive industrial activity benefits the region where the resources are found) by localizing the processing of critical minerals. A useful example is the case of Botswana, which acquired a 15 percent stake in the world's biggest diamond miner, DeBeers, which helped lock in local diamond-cutting activities.

This would represent a radical system shift in the DRC's economic governance apparatus—and such a shift is imperative, in security as well as economic governance. Without that radical shift, the benefits of critical minerals won't reach the people of the DRC. The Trump administration peace proposal could provide a pathway to a just peace and security between DRC and its neighbors, most notably Rwanda.

Partner perspective: The DRC's vast potential extends beyond mining

Thomas De Dreux-Brézé is director of strategy development at Rawbank, the DRC's largest bank. He manages relations with international partners (fundraising, co-financing, syndication, etc.) and intrapreneurial projects. Rawbank supports the work of the Atlantic Council's Africa Center on the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The DRC is a land of untapped scale and promise. At the heart of Africa, where mining remains the backbone of the economy, the DRC is endowed with abundant natural wealth, a youthful and dynamic population, and a pivotal geographical position—holding many of the critical ingredients for large-scale economic transformation. While it faces undeniable structural challenges, political instability, infrastructure deficits, and regulatory complexity, these should not obscure the deeper truth: The DRC is a country in motion, with massive potential across multiple sectors.

As the global economic landscape shifts, marked by the rise of emerging markets, regional trade integration, and the acceleration of sustainable investments, the DRC stands out with compelling opportunities, particularly in energy, agriculture, climate finance, financial services, and intra-African trade. Realizing these prospects will require strategic vision, strong partnerships, and patient capital. But the potential returns—economic, social, and geopolitical—could be transformative, not only for the Congo but for the continent as a whole.

The energy sector as a pillar of transformation

No sustainable development is possible without access to affordable and reliable energy. And in this field, the DRC stands out as one of the world's most promising frontiers.

The Congo River, the second largest in the world by discharge, holds a staggering 100 gigawatts (GW) of hydropower potential. Yet only a fraction of that is currently harnessed. Similarly, solar and wind energy remain vastly underexploited, even though recent studies suggest the country could generate up to 85 GW from renewable sources at competitive prices.

This untapped capacity offers a double dividend: powering domestic industries and households, while positioning the DRC as a regional supplier of green energy. Existing projects signal the way forward, including the rehabilitation of the Inga I and II dams, off-grid solar initiatives in eastern provinces, and hybrid minigrid pilots supported by international development banks.

But unlocking this sector will require not only investment in generation, but a massive expansion of transmission infrastructure, regional interconnections, and regulatory reform. If done right, the DRC could emerge not just as an energy consumer, but as a green energy champion for Africa.

Monetizing the Congo Basin's ecological wealth

In the global climate equation, the Congo Basin is a critical wilderness area. As the second-largest rainforest on the planet, it captures an estimated 1.5 billion tons of CO_2 annually, roughly equivalent to the emissions of the entire European Union.

Because 70 percent of this vast rainforest is located within the DRC, the country has a unique role to play in planetary stabilization. But that role must be backed by economic value. A well-regulated carbon market—anchored in strong institutions, reliable measurement systems, and transparent benefit sharing—could become a vital source of revenue for the state and local communities.

The groundwork exists. The Blue Fund for the Congo Basin, the Presidential Climate Finance Task Force, and recent bilateral discussions with major carbon-credit buyers (Shell, Vitol, Engie, Microsoft, Amazon, the World Bank, Delta Air Lines, Netflix, Eni, etc.) demonstrate momentum. What's needed now is acceleration: a national registry of credits, clear legal frameworks, and partnerships with credible certifiers.

Done properly, the DRC's ecological stewardship can become a global public good, monetized fairly and reinvested in national development.

Agriculture as a national priority

Few countries possess agricultural potential on the scale of the DRC. With over eighty million hectares of arable land, most of it untouched, and a rapidly growing population projected to double by 2050, the DRC could become a major agricultural exporter and a driver of food security across the continent.

And yet, paradoxically, it remains a net food importer. The reasons are well known: fragmented value chains, poor logistics, lack of mechanization, and security concerns in the east.

But the opportunity is immense. Investments in agricultural technology, cold storage, rural roads, and access to inputs could lift yields dramatically. Initiatives like the revitalization of coffee cooperatives in South Kivu or the expansion of community irrigation systems in Kwilu show what is possible when technology, capital, and local know-how align.

In parallel, creating agricultural growth corridors and establishing specialized export zones would allow Congolese products (such as coffee, cocoa, rice, and cassava) to reach regional and global markets. Agriculture is not only about feeding people—it is about creating jobs, increasing exports, and building rural resilience.

Unlocking financial inclusion in a young, digital nation

The DRC's demographic reality is its most powerful asset: a young, urbanizing population with rising aspirations and digital adoption. Yet financial inclusion remains stubbornly low. Less than 10 percent of the population has access to traditional banking and overall inclusion stands at around 38.5 percent.

This gap is a massive opportunity. The fintech revolution is already reshaping access to financial services. And in the DRC, local innovators are leading the charge.

The next frontier is to bridge fintech and formal banking: enabling savings, credit, insurance, and investment products through digital rails. Partnerships between fintech companies, microfinance institutions, and mobile operators will be key to scaling impact.

To catalyze the sector, regulators must continue building trust—ensuring data privacy, protecting consumers, and clarifying tax regimes. Financial services are not just about transactions, they are about empowering people, fueling enterprise, and driving shared prosperity.

The DRC as continental logistics hub

With nine borders and a landmass larger than Western Europe, the DRC is uniquely positioned to become a continental logistics hub. Its central location offers a direct line to West, East, and southern Africa—and with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) gaining traction, this position becomes even more valuable.

Realizing this potential requires hard and soft infrastructure alike. The development of the Lobito Corridor,* connecting the DRC and Zambia to Angola's Atlantic coast, offers a cost-effective route to global markets. Investments in rail, roads, dry ports, and customs harmonization are already underway, supported by major global and regional institutions.

Beyond Lobito, projects such as the modernization of the Matadi-Kinshasa corridor and the establishment of special economic zones along border areas can spur regional supply chains, particularly in agriculture, textiles, and energy services.

Trade is not only about exporting but also about integrating into African value chains, reducing transaction costs, and creating cross-border prosperity. The DRC's geography is its destiny—if paired with the right vision.

The case for confidence

To invest in the DRC today is not an act of charity or risk appetite. It is an act of strategic foresight.

Few countries offer such a rare blend of demographic dynamism, natural abundance, and regional leverage. The fundamentals are compelling, the reform trajectory is positive, and the appetite for change is growing in both the public and private sectors.

The international community (investors, development partners, entrepreneurs, etc.) has a role to play, not in prescribing solutions, but in cocreating a new development model with the Congolese people. One rooted in inclusivity, sustainability, and shared prosperity.

The DRC is not waiting to be discovered. It is asserting its place in the twenty-first century. Those who choose to walk alongside it today will not only unlock significant returns but also help write one of the most important economic success stories of our time.

US investors must lead on responsible sourcing in the DRC

Nicole Namwezi Batumike is a gender and responsible sourcing specialist at the Congolese nonprofit Panzi Foundation.

The ongoing conversations between the United States and the DRC over access to critical minerals present a rare and urgent opportunity to reset the terms of engagement with Congolese stakeholders and the broader mineral ecosystem. US officials have indicated that American and other Western companies are prepared to make multi-billion-dollar investments in the region once the bilateral mineral deals are finalized. The DRC holds vast reserves of cobalt, copper, and other strategic minerals essential to global technological and energy systems, yet for decades, the Congolese people have borne the costs of extraction without sharing in its benefits, treated as collateral in deals driven by geopolitical rivalries and elite bargains. On top of fueling instability and deepening marginalization, these transactional arrangements have also exposed investors to growing legal, financial, and reputational risks.

Experience shows that when mining fails to deliver value to local communities, companies lose their social license to operate, along with the legitimacy of the regimes they once depended on. In turn, those regimes have proven willing to shift allegiances in pursuit of regime security. The DRC, for example, has filed lawsuits against downstream tech giants and pushed for sanctions targeting neighboring countries laundering conflict minerals. It is increasingly clear that the Congolese regime is not bound to any single partner.

US engagement in Africa must reflect geopolitical realities. Recent peace deal discussions show the United States is willing to engage Rwanda's refining sector—despite Kigali's documented role in violating Congolese sovereignty and committing war crimes. If responsible sourcing is to truly guide stable engagements, policymakers must reckon with the risks of endorsing impunity and failing to deliver justice for the Congolese people.

The negotiation of a US-DRC mineral deal offers a crucial opportunity to break this cycle, provided Kinshasa resists the historical pattern of leveraging minerals solely for regime survival, and provided the United States supports a model of genuine security: one not rooted in a logic of extractivism but in mutual accountability and the rule of law. By aligning US investment strategy with Congolese legal frameworks and responsible sourcing standards, both countries can lower risks by forging a sustainable model.

Responsible sourcing is a legal and strategic imperative

Meeting international due diligence standards to ensure that a given business activity does not involve human-rights violations has shifted from being a reputational safeguard to a legal and strategic requirement. Standards include the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Guidelines and the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Human rights due diligence is now codified through laws such as the European Union's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, France's Duty of Vigilance Law, and Germany's Supply Chain Due Diligence Act, making risk mitigation binding across global operations, especially in high-risk contexts like the DRC.

Yet despite these frameworks, the DRC remains at war, and the global minerals trade continues to serve short-term political and economic agendas. In 2024, the US Government Accountability Office reported that Section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank Act (America's flagship due diligence law) had not reduced violence in eastern Congo and may have exacerbated conflict around artisanal gold-mining sites. The US government's insistence on better outcomes demonstrates that due diligence is a means, not an end, and it cannot resolve the structural drivers of the conflict.

The DRC's mining codes provide a responsible framework for US investors

It is in this context that the DRC's 2018 mining code emerges not as an obstacle but as a strategic foundation. On top of aligning closely with international expectations for human rights due diligence, the code offers investors and companies a clear, locally grounded framework to manage risk and build sustainable partnerships. Born out of years marked by revenue leakage, extractive impunity, and donor-driven liberalization, the code reasserts the government's dual roles as a regulator and shareholder while mandating local beneficiation (a part of mineral processing). It raises royalty rates on strategic minerals like cobalt, introduces a "super-profits" tax, and makes community development contributions legally binding. It also restricts the use of "stabilization clauses," which limit countries' ability to apply new regulations to investors with agreements signed before the regulations went into effect, and strengthens environmental and social accountability.

Pilot models offer early lessons in responsible sourcing. For example, at Mutoshi in the Lualaba province, the collaboration of multinational commodities group Trafigura with Chemaf, a Congolese company, and Pact, an international nonprofit organization, showed that formalizing artisanal mining not only met sourcing commitments but also helped contribute to de-risking efforts. Meanwhile, the Panzi Foundation's Green Mining Community Model, an initiative led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Denis Mukwege, links inclusive training in responsible sourcing and value addition with investments in essential infrastructure like health and education. By seeking to address the root causes of conflict and the violent tactics it enables—such as the use of rape as a weapon of war—the Green Mining Community model promotes integration and community empowerment, positioning responsible sourcing as a pathway to long-term stability and shared value.

Opportunities and challenges in the US policy landscape

The United States is on the path to establishing promising policies and frameworks for responsible investment, as demonstrated by the bipartisan BRIDGE to DRC Act, which emphasizes governance and transparency. Initiatives such as the US-backed expansion of the Lobito Corridor* linking the DRC to Angola's Lobito port, alongside previous efforts like USAID's Just Gold project, could provide a strong foundation. However, their long-term impact will depend on aligning with fair labor and environmental standards, sustainable development, and, importantly, the continuity of these efforts under the new administration.

At the same time, setbacks like the 180-day suspension of Foreign Corrupt Practices Act enforcement must be urgently addressed. Restoring accountability is essential for ethical investment.

As US Rep. Sara Jacobs highlighted in a March 2025 Africa Subcommittee hearing, investments will only succeed in the long term if they do not ignore the root causes of exploitation.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo stands at a pivotal juncture: either the cycle of extractive exploitation continues, or the government leverages its mineral wealth to foster long-term development. For US stakeholders, the way forward lies in transparent, law-abiding, and community-centered partnerships. This requires a commitment to the DRC's 2018 Mining Code and collaboration with Congolese civil society. While short-term gains may be tempting, only those who embrace responsible sourcing and inclusive models will build sustainable, competitive advantages.

Better roads and stable power grids can unlock the DRC's potential

Calixte Ahokpossi is mission chief, Democratic Republic of the Congo, for the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has vast economic potential, but infrastructure gaps remain a major constraint. The country is rich in natural resources and has a large and young population that could drive its development. However, chronic underinvestment in critical infrastructure—roads, rail networks, and power generation—continues to stifle economic progress. Additionally, governance challenges, corruption, macroeconomic instability, and recurring shocks—including armed conflicts in its eastern region—exacerbate fragility.

Addressing these challenges requires tackling their sociopolitical and economic roots, while leveraging the country's vast natural resource wealth to rapidly bridge the infrastructure gap and foster diversified and sustained economic growth and poverty reduction. The DRC needs an ambitious infrastructure agenda, prioritizing the development of transport corridors and stable power grids.

Weak, unevenly distributed infrastructure

The DRC's road network is severely underdeveloped, limiting mobility and trade. With only 152,400 kilometers (km) of roads, connectivity remains a challenge. The roads serve the nation's vast 2.45 million km^2 territory, a road-to-territory ratio that is just 40 percent of the sub-Saharan African average of 0.14 km/ km^2, which is already low compared to other regions. Fewer than 10 percent of these roads are passable year-round, and more than half of Congolese (54.5 percent) must travel over an hour to reach a paved or asphalted road. Urban-rural disparities are stark. In the southeast (Haut-Katanga and Lualaba), large-scale copper and cobalt mining has spurred some investment in roads and rail lines, but the transportation infrastructure remains vastly insufficient for a region that supplies most of the world's cobalt and a significant share of global copper. Indeed, the DRC accounts for over 70 percent of global cobalt output and approximately half the world's proven reserves. In contrast, the eastern provinces (North and South Kivu, Ituri)—rich in gold and the "3T" minerals (tin, tantalum, tungsten)—receive minimal investment, as small-scale artisanal mining dominates, offering limited economic spillovers.

The DRC remains one of the least electrified nations despite vast hydropower potential. Only 19.1 percent of the population has access to electricity, with rural coverage plummeting to a mere 2 percent. The country is heavily dependent on two aging hydropower plants: Inga 1 (with an installed capacity of 351 megawatts) and Inga 2 (installed capacity of 1,424 MW), both under rehabilitation and operating at roughly 80 percent capacity. These plants primarily serve the mining industry. Ambitious projects like Inga 3 (3,000 to 11,000 MW) and the even larger Grand Inga (which could surpass China's Three Gorges Dam) underscore the Congo River's vast potential. Yet delays, shifting international partnerships, and environmental concerns have repeatedly stalled construction.

A barrier to inclusive growth

Weak infrastructure inflates costs, constrains businesses, and fosters economic disparities. Poor infrastructure raises transportation and production costs, stifling economic activity in time-sensitive sectors (like perishable goods). This is evident in agriculture, which employs the majority of Congolese (over 60 percent of the labor force). Despite the DRC's fertile land, poor transport links prevent farmers from bringing their surplus produce to markets. Goods perish on farms, and the country remains dependent on food imports, making it vulnerable to global food price shocks and exchange rate fluctuations. These disruptions fuel inflation, disproportionately affecting the poorest. The weak transportation network also restricts economic diversification and limits access to remote mineral deposits, leaving critical resources untapped—or controlled by armed groups.

Unreliable energy supply disrupts businesses and limits opportunities for local transformation and adding value. From irrigation systems to medical clinics, power shortages affect essential activities and reinforce a cycle of poverty and missed opportunities. They also hamper industrialization, making local mineral processing, manufacturing, and daily business operations difficult or virtually impossible. Mining companies report that frequent power shortages force them to rely on diesel generators, raising production costs substantially. This inefficiency hits small businesses even harder, eroding profit margins and reducing corporate income tax revenues. Under these conditions, the DRC's ambition to increase local mineral processing and move up the value chain remains a major challenge.

Five steps to good roads, reliable power, and economic growth

1. **Invest in transport and energy infrastructure to generate sustainable growth.** The DRC's vast mineral wealth and energy potential make it an attractive destination for large-scale private investment, but various bottlenecks such as infrastructure, business environment, and governance must be addressed. We focus here on infrastructure ones. Unlocking the hydropower potential (100,000 MW, which is 13 percent of the world's total) could meet domestic needs and generate export revenue. Modernizing existing hydroelectric facilities and expanding transmission grids would provide clean, affordable electricity to both industry and households. For the mining sector, improved energy access could lower production costs while enhancing compliance with global environmental, social, and governance standards. Meanwhile, broader electrification would fuel local enterprise, boost economic diversification, and improve living standards.
2. **Diversify financing for the substantial investments needed to bridge the infrastructure gap.** The International Monetary Fund estimates that achieving universal electricity access would require annual spending of 5.9 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), while ensuring that 75 percent of the population lives within two kilometers of an all-season road would necessitate 14.9 percent of GDP annually over ten years. Given these costs, leveraging diversified public, private, and international financing is key to accelerating infrastructure development.
3. **Strengthen public investment management to maximize returns.** Weak governance and public investment management have led to waste, corruption risks, and substandard project execution. Strengthening investment governance would maximize value for money, boosting private-sector confidence and investment. Equally key is creating fiscal space for critical infrastructure and social and human capital investments. This requires improving domestic tax and nontax revenue collection and prioritizing growth-enhancing spending. Yet low revenue collection, especially relative to peer countries and the DRC's economic potential, remains a major constraint.
4. **Pursue prudent, strategic government borrowing to secure favorable terms.** Domestically, containing inflation would lower borrowing costs and encourage higher domestic savings, strengthening the local financial market. Externally, the focus should remain on concessional financing, prioritizing low-cost, long-term loans. Over time, as policy credibility strengthens and the country's creditworthiness improves, access to international financial markets could be considered, particularly when global conditions are favorable.
5. **Scale up infrastructure investments through regional partnerships.** The DRC would benefit from harnessing regional frameworks such as the East African Community and the Southern African Development Community to mobilize resources for transport and energy infrastructure. Cross-border energy grids and trade corridors can reduce operational costs, attract larger financing and enhance the country's global competitiveness. Regional collaboration offers a pragmatic solution to tackling infrastructure deficits while strengthening economic resilience. Also, the development of the Lobito Corridor,* linking the DRC to Angola's Lobito port, can deepen regional integration and offer more cost-effective transportation routes for DRC's exports—though it will be important to avoid undermining parallel port development projects in the western part of the DRC.

In sum, the future of the DRC will be promising if its development challenges can be addressed in an ambitious and realistic manner. Developing a reliable road network and extending electricity provision will be critical to reap the DRC's vast potential—and will need to be supported by sound macroeconomic policies and reforms to strengthen the country's resilience to overcome its fragility.

Acknowledgments

*Rawbank, which supports the Atlantic Council Africa Center's work on the Democratic Republic of Congo, has an equity stake in the Africa Finance Corporation, which leads the development of the Lobito Corridor.

Atlantic Council Board of Directors

Atlantic Council

The Atlantic Council is a nonpartisan organization that promotes constructive US leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the central role of the Atlantic community in meeting today's global challenges.

Atlantic Council
1400 L Street NW, 11th Floor
Washington, DC 20005

(202) 463-7226

www.AtlanticCouncil.org