

A Precarious Pact: Scoping the Risks of a U.S.-DRC Minerals Deal Amidst Instability and Balkanization Fears

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Abstract

Background: The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) possesses significant reserves of critical minerals, attracting international interest for resource development. However, the nation's complex operational environment, characterized by political instability, armed conflict, and governance deficits, particularly in its eastern provinces, presents considerable challenges to foreign engagement. This review examines the potential implications of a prospective minerals deal between the United States (U.S.) and the DRC. **Methods:** A scoping review was conducted, synthesizing information from academic literature, policy analyses, and reputable media reports. The review focused on identifying multifaceted risks associated with a U.S.-DRC minerals agreement. **Findings:** Analysis reveals that such a deal carries substantial risks, including the potential exacerbation of existing conflicts, empowerment of non-state armed actors, deepening of de facto balkanization in eastern DRC, and U.S. entanglement in complex regional dynamics. Furthermore, significant human rights and reputational hazards are evident. Historical regulatory efforts concerning conflict minerals have demonstrated limited success in fundamentally altering resource-conflict mechanisms. Recent U.S. private sector interest, exemplified by engagements in projects like the Manono lithium deposit, occurs within this challenging context of existing disputes and governance issues. **Conclusion:** Without robust preconditions addressing governance reform, comprehensive conflict resolution, and enhanced transparency, a broad U.S.-DRC minerals agreement poses a high risk of severe negative consequences, potentially undermining long-term stability in the DRC and the surrounding region.

Keywords

Critical Minerals, Democratic Republic of Congo, Conflict Resources,

1. Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) stands as a globally significant repository of critical minerals, possessing some of the world's largest and highest-grade deposits of cobalt (essential for electric vehicle batteries and portable electronics), copper (vital for electrical infrastructure and renewable energy systems), lithium (a key component of rechargeable batteries), tantalum (used in capacitors for electronic devices), tin, tungsten, and gold, all of which are indispensable for the ongoing green energy transition and the broader advanced technology sector (Gulley, 2022). However, this extraordinary endowment of natural resources has, for decades, been paradoxically enmeshed with protracted conflict, pervasive political instability, and severe humanitarian crises, particularly concentrated in its eastern provinces (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; McCalpin, 2002). This resource curse narrative is characterized by minerals often fueling armed groups, exacerbating corruption, and contributing to weak governance, with limited benefits accruing to the broader Congolese population (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; McCalpin, 2002).

Recently, intense international attention has focused on a potential large-scale minerals agreement between the United States (U.S.) and the DRC (de Koning, 2011; AInvest, 2025b; Africa Intelligence, 2025). Some analyses and reports suggest that the DRC government under President Félix Tshisekedi views a substantive minerals and investment deal with the U.S. as a multifaceted strategic opportunity. This could potentially involve granting preferential or exclusive access to certain mineral concessions in return for U.S. security assistance, foreign direct investment, and diplomatic support, particularly as his administration grapples with persistent and escalating armed rebellion in the mineral-rich eastern territories (Nigerian Mining, 2025; Hanai, 2021). Such a partnership could be seen by Kinshasa as a means to bolster state capacity, generate revenue, and address critical security threats through an influential international alliance.

Historically, the international community, with significant U.S. involvement, has attempted to address the nexus between mineral extraction and conflict in the DRC through regulatory interventions. The most prominent example is Section 1502 of the U.S. Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010, which mandated that publicly traded U.S. companies conduct due diligence on their supply chains to determine if minerals designated as conflict minerals (tin, tantalum, tungsten, and gold—3TG) originated from the DRC or adjoining countries and contributed to financing armed groups (de Koning, 2011). The intention was to enhance transparency and reduce revenue flows to these groups. However, a considerable body of research, including academic studies and policy reports, suggests that these well-intentioned efforts have yielded limited success in fundamentally altering the intricate mechanisms that drive resource-

fueled conflict (U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2024; Cooley PubCo., 2024). In some instances, such regulations may have had unintended negative consequences, such as creating a de facto embargo on artisanal miners unable to meet complex due diligence requirements, thereby harming livelihoods, or causing illicit trade to shift to less regulated minerals or routes (U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2024). Reinforcing these critiques, a U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, for instance, concluded that there was no empirical evidence establishing that the SEC's conflict minerals disclosure rule directly led to a discernible decrease in violence or a significant improvement in local security conditions in eastern DRC (Cooley PubCo., 2024; Mongabay, 2025). This suggests the adaptability of armed groups and the deep-seated nature of the conflict drivers beyond simple resource financing.

This scoping review assesses the potential dangers inherent in a new U.S.-DRC minerals deal by conducting a comprehensive examination of publicly available analyses, academic research, policy briefs, and investigative reports. It argues that proceeding with such an agreement without a deeply integrated and robust strategy that prioritizes comprehensive peacebuilding, substantive governance reform (including anti-corruption measures and transparency in contract negotiation and revenue management), and tangible, equitable local benefit-sharing mechanisms risks not only failing to achieve U.S. strategic objectives but also actively exacerbating existing instability. Such an outcome could lead to a deeper de facto balkanization of the country, entangle the U.S. in complex and potentially irresolvable regional conflicts, and pose significant ethical, human rights, and geopolitical risks for the United States.

2. Methods

This study employs a scoping review methodology to map and synthesize existing knowledge and expert opinions concerning a potential U.S.-DRC minerals deal and its associated risks. The review systematically scanned a range of sources, including academic literature on conflict mineral regulation (de Koning, 2011; U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2024), background on cobalt production (Gulley, 2022), recent news and analyses concerning specific U.S. company engagements in DRC lithium projects (e.g., KoBold Metals at Manono (Mining Weekly, 2025; Metal Tech News, 2025; IndexBox, 2025; Discovery Alert, 2025; Brookings Institution, 2025), reports on U.S.-DRC governmental discussions (Nigerian Mining, 2025; Hanai, 2021), and publicly available information derived from policy briefs, think tank reports, and reputable international news outlets (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002).

The search for information focused on themes relevant to:

- 1) (de Koning, 2011; AInvest, 2025b; Africa Intelligence, 2025; AInvest, 2025b), KoBold Metals' \$1 billion investment commitment for Manono lithium (Mining Weekly, 2025; Metal Tech News, 2025; IndexBox, 2025; Discovery Alert, 2025).
- 2) The current political, security, and governance situation in the DRC, partic-

ularly in the eastern provinces (e.g., state capacity, corruption, armed group activity, Rwandan involvement (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Nigerian Mining, 2025; Africa Briefing, 2025; U.S. Embassy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2024; Humanrightsresearch.org, 2025).

3) Historical context of mineral exploitation and conflict in the DRC, including the impact of previous regulatory efforts (de Koning, 2011; U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2024; Cooley PubCo., 2024; Mongabay, 2025; Bond, 2022).

4) Potential risks and consequences of the proposed deal (e.g., human rights, conflict exacerbation, regional stability, and Balkanization fears).

The analysis adopted a critical perspective, aligning with concerns regarding the potential negative impacts of such a deal if implemented without addressing fundamental governance and conflict issues in the DRC. Information was synthesized narratively to construct a coherent argument regarding the dangers and necessary preconditions for any U.S. engagement.

3. Discussion

A High-Stakes Gamble in a Fractured Land—Intricacies and Deepening Concerns

The geopolitical motivations compelling a potential U.S.-DRC minerals deal are undeniably potent and rooted in urgent strategic imperatives. Securing unfettered access to resources such as cobalt, lithium, copper, and tantalum—found in abundance in the DRC (Gulley, 2022) is paramount for the United States' technological advancement, green energy transition, and national security apparatus in the 21st century. Simultaneously, there is a clear strategic objective to challenge and mitigate China's entrenched dominance in global critical mineral supply chains (de Koning, 2011; AInvest, 2025b; Africa Intelligence, 2025; AInvest, 2025a). (de Koning, 2011; Africa Intelligence, 2025). Recent U.S. corporate engagements, notably KoBold Metals' ambitious venture into the Manono lithium deposit, backed by prominent U.S. investors and involving a pledged investment exceeding \$1 billion, signal a tangible American commercial and strategic push to gain a foothold (Mining Weekly, 2025; Metal Tech News, 2025; IndexBox, 2025; Discovery Alert, 2025; Brookings Institution, 2025). This initiative is widely interpreted as part of a broader U.S. governmental strategy to diversify supply sources, reduce dependency on geostrategic rivals, and directly engage with resource-rich African nations through high-level diplomacy and investment partnerships (IndexBox, 2025; Discovery Alert, 2025). The DRC government under President Tshisekedi has reportedly reciprocated this interest, viewing a closer minerals and security partnership with the U.S. as a means to attract investment, obtain security assistance against ongoing rebellions in its resource-rich eastern provinces (notably those allegedly backed by Rwanda), and thereby bolster its administrative capacity and international standing (Hanai, 2021; Discovery Alert, 2025).

However, the pursuit of these strategic and commercial objectives within the

DRC's profoundly volatile and complex landscape transforms this endeavor into a high-stakes gamble. The potential for devastating unintended consequences is immense if such engagement is not managed with exceptional prudence, deep contextual understanding, and a radically different operational paradigm than has characterized many past foreign resource engagements in the region. The allure of mineral wealth must be weighed against the stark realities of a fractured state and a deeply troubled history.

3.1. The DRC's Internal Labyrinth: Governance Deficits and Pervasive Insecurity Amplified

The DRC's most fundamental and persistent challenge remains one of deeply compromised governance, a multifaceted crisis that has plagued the nation for decades (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Nigerian Mining, 2025; Africa Briefing, 2025). This is not merely an issue of insufficient capacity but often involves systemic kleptocracy, where state institutions have historically been exploited for private enrichment rather than public good (Nigerian Mining, 2025). This has led to the entrenchment of a profound governance vacuum, particularly in the vast, remote, and mineral-rich eastern provinces, which often operate with limited effective oversight from Kinshasa (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Nigerian Mining, 2025; Africa Briefing, 2025). Corruption is reportedly endemic, permeating multiple levels of the state apparatus, from opaque mining contract negotiations and licensing processes to the diversion of resource revenues that could otherwise fuel national development and essential public services (Nigerian Mining, 2025; Africa Briefing, 2025). Despite President Tshisekedi's stated reform agendas and efforts to attract reputable U.S. investment as a strategic lever for development and stability (Hanai, 2021; Discovery Alert, 2025), his government continues to struggle to project consistent authority, enforce the rule of law, provide basic security, and deliver essential services across the entirety of the nation's expansive territory (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Humanrightsresearch.org., 2025). This weakness is often exploited by both internal and external actors.

This governance vacuum is most acute and violently manifested in Eastern DRC, which for many observers, continues to experience a de facto balkanization, with swathes of territory effectively outside consistent state control (Nigerian Mining, 2025; Africa Briefing, 2025; U.S. Embassy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2024). The region remains an epicenter of protracted armed conflict, involving a complex and shifting tapestry of over 120 distinct domestic armed groups, foreign-backed militias often pursuing proxy agendas, and, troublingly, elements of the national security forces (FARDC) who are themselves frequently implicated in illicit resource exploitation, human rights abuses, and collusive behavior with non-state armed actors control (Nigerian Mining, 2025; Africa Briefing, 2025). The M23 rebel group, whose resurgence since early 2025 and military capabilities are widely documented by United Nations expert panels and U.S. intelligence as being substantially supported by neighboring Rwanda, continues to

seize territory, control vital transport routes crucial for mineral smuggling, and perpetrate widespread violence against civilian populations, leading to recurrent mass displacement and humanitarian emergencies (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Nigerian Mining, 2025; Hanai, 2021; Africa Briefing, 2025; U.S. Embassy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2024; Humanrightsresearch.org., 2025). This ongoing conflict is not a peripheral issue but is intrinsically and historically interwoven with the control and exploitation of the East's abundant mineral resources (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; McCalpin, 2002). Armed groups, criminal networks, and allegedly corrupt state officials often control or illegally tax mining operations, particularly within the sprawling artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector, creating a shadow economy that fuels violence and undermines legitimate enterprise (U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2024; Africa Briefing, 2025).

The Manono lithium project, now a focal point of U.S. corporate interest through KoBold Metals, vividly exemplifies these deeply embedded complexities (Mining Weekly, 2025; Metal Tech News, 2025; IndexBox, 2025; Discovery Alert, 2025; Brookings Institution, 2025). This potentially world-class deposit has been mired in protracted ownership disputes, opaque legal challenges, and shifting political alliances, with AVZ Minerals' rights being contentiously revoked by the Congolese government in 2023. Subsequently, a portion of this significant license was controversially allocated to a joint venture involving China's Zijin Mining and the DRC's state-owned mining company, Cominière (Mining Weekly, 2025; Metal Tech News, 2025; Discovery Alert, 2025; Brookings Institution, 2025). KoBold Metals' recent framework agreement aims to consolidate interests and develop the southern portion of the Manono territory. However, this complex history of contested claims, abrupt governmental decisions, and the presence of multiple international actors with competing interests underscores the profoundly unstable legal, regulatory, and political environment surrounding high-value mining concessions in the DRC (Metal Tech News, 2025; Discovery Alert, 2025). While KoBold Metals publicly emphasizes its commitment to rapid, responsible, and ethical development, alongside significant job creation and community benefit (Mining Weekly, 2025; Metal Tech News, 2025), the DRC's long and sorrowful history of resource exploitation often characterized by a "resource curse" dynamic where immense mineral wealth translates into minimal local development, environmental degradation, and heightened social tensions—looms large as a cautionary backdrop (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Mining Weekly, 2025).

3.2. Echoes from the Past: The Inadequacy of Due Diligence without Systemic Reform

The international community, spearheaded by the U.S., has previously attempted to address the pernicious nexus between valuable minerals and intractable conflict in the DRC. The most significant of these interventions, Section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010 (de Koning,

2011), stands as a critical case study, offering sobering lessons for any new U.S. engagement (U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2024; Cooley PubCo., 2024; Mongabay, 2025; Bond, 2022). This legislation imposed novel due diligence and reporting requirements on publicly traded U.S. companies, mandating them to determine if the tin, tantalum, tungsten, and gold (3TG) in their products originated from the DRC or adjoining countries and, if so, whether their trade benefited armed groups (de Koning, 2011). The explicit ambition was to enhance supply chain transparency and starve conflict actors of a key source of funding.

However, a decade of implementation and extensive analysis, including scholarly work by Hanai (2021) and official evaluations, concludes that while such regulations prompted some important behavioral shifts among multinational corporations (such as increased demand for traceable “conflict-free” minerals and the establishment of industry-led traceability schemes like ITSCI), they “have not led to changes at the mechanism level” that fundamentally sever the deep-rooted links between resource exploitation and conflict (U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2024). The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), in its comprehensive reviews, found no definitive empirical evidence that Section 1502 directly resulted in a measurable reduction in violence or a significant improvement in overall security conditions in eastern DRC (Cooley PubCo., 2024; Mongabay, 2025). Instead, the GAO and other researchers noted several concerning, albeit unintended, consequences. These included a de facto embargo effect in some regions, where international buyers withdrew from sourcing from the DRC altogether due to the complexities and costs of compliance, thereby harming the livelihoods of legitimate artisanal miners and their communities (Cooley PubCo., 2024; Mongabay, 2025). Furthermore, armed groups often demonstrated considerable adaptability, shifting their focus to other easily exploitable and less regulated minerals (such as gold, which is notoriously difficult to trace due to its high value-to-weight ratio and fungibility) or diversifying into alternative revenue streams like charcoal production, illegal taxation, or protection rackets (U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2024; Cooley PubCo., 2024). This aligns with broader research indicating that interventions focusing narrowly on trade regulation or specific commodities, without concurrently addressing the underlying drivers of conflict such as profound security sector failures, weak state governance, impunity for powerful spoilers, and regional geopolitical rivalries—often fall short of their intended peacebuilding objectives (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; de Koning, 2011).

This history strongly suggests that any new U.S. engagement strategy predominantly reliant on corporate due diligence initiatives or private sector codes of conduct, while necessary components, will prove insufficient to guarantee responsible sourcing, prevent resource capture by malign actors, or contribute meaningfully to peace and stability if the overarching context of systemic poor governance, pervasive impunity, and active, multifaceted conflict remains unaddressed. Future U.S. policy must therefore integrate due diligence require-

ments with broader, more robust, and politically committed efforts to support fundamental systemic reforms within the DRC, encompassing security, justice, and economic governance.

3.3. Potential Impacts of a New U.S.-DRC Minerals Deal: A Deepened Risk Assessment

A U.S.-DRC minerals deal, whether manifesting as a broad governmental framework agreement or a series of significant private sector investments facilitated and encouraged by U.S. policy, carries substantial, deeply interconnected risks. These risks, if not meticulously anticipated and mitigated through strong safeguards, transparent processes, and a nuanced understanding of the local socio-political

Table 1. Key risk categories and potential negative impacts of a U.S.-DRC minerals deal.

Risk Category	Specific Manifestations in DRC Context	Potential Negative Impact of a Poorly Structured Deal
1. Governance & Political Stability	Endemic corruption; weak state institutions; lack of transparency in resource contracts; limited rule of law, especially in the East (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Nigerian Mining, 2025; Africa Briefing, 2025); history of disputed mining licenses (e.g., Manono (Mining Weekly, 2025; Metal Tech News, 2025; Discovery Alert, 2025; Brookings Institution, 2025).	Reinforcement of kleptocratic networks; legitimization of unaccountable actors; further erosion of state legitimacy if benefits are not widely shared; elite capture of deal revenues; exacerbation of internal political rivalries.
2. Security & Conflict Dynamics	Presence of numerous armed groups (e.g., M23); external interference (e.g., Rwandan support for M23 (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Nigerian Mining, 2025; Hanai, 2021; Cooley PubCo., 2024; Africa Briefing, 2025; U.S. Embassy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2024; Humanrightsresearch.org., 2025); interethnic violence (McCalpin, 2002); FARDC misconduct; minerals fueling conflict (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Hanai, 2021; Africa Briefing, 2025).	Exacerbation of existing conflicts if deal empowers certain factions or provides new resources to be contested; U.S. entanglement in proxy wars; failure to address root causes of conflict, leading to renewed violence over resources; legitimization of armed actors through de facto recognition or benefit.
3. Human Rights & Labor	Widespread use of child labor in ASM (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Chatham House, 2025); forced labor; unsafe working conditions; displacement of communities for mining activities; environmental degradation from unregulated mining (Mining Weekly, 2025).	U.S. complicity in human rights abuses; severe reputational damage to U.S. government and participating companies; undermining of international norms on responsible sourcing; negative health and environmental impacts on local populations.
4. Socio-Economic Impact	Limited local benefit from resource extraction; “resource curse” phenomenon (Mining Weekly, 2025); environmental degradation; land disputes; dependence on ASM for livelihoods in unstable areas (Mining Weekly, 2025; Africa Briefing, 2025; Chatham House, 2025).	Increased local grievances if communities are excluded from benefits or negatively impacted (e.g., water supply issues from lithium mining (Mining Weekly, 2025); further environmental damage if safeguards are weak; potential disruption of ASM livelihoods without viable alternatives; failure to deliver on promised job creation or development (Mining Weekly, 2025; Metal Tech News, 2025).

Continued

5. Regional Stability & Balkanization	De facto control of eastern territories by non-state actors/external proxies (Nigerian Mining, 2025; Africa Briefing, 2025; U.S. Embassy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2024); historical secessionist tendencies (McCalpin, 2002); porous borders; proposals for minerals to be exported via Rwanda under peace deals (Discovery Alert, 2025; Brookings Institution, 2025; AEL.org., 2025).	Strengthening of secessionist forces if deal focuses on specific enclaves without national integration; formalization of existing fragmentation; increased regional tensions and instability if deal is perceived to favor certain regional actors or legitimize cross-border exploitation.
6. Geopolitical Outcomes for U.S.	Complex operational environment; deep entrenchment of other actors (e.g., China (de Koning, 2011; AInvest, 2025b; Africa Intelligence, 2025; AInvest, 2025a); risk of mission creep if security elements are involved (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Nigerian Mining, 2025); history of failed states and interventions (McCalpin, 2002).	Limited strategic gains relative to immense risks undertaken; potential for costly and prolonged entanglement; damage to U.S. credibility and soft power if deal fails or backfires or is perceived as exploitative (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Nigerian Mining, 2025; KnightScholar—SUNY Geneseo, 2019).

context, could lead to outcomes diametrically opposed to stated U.S. goals of promoting stability and securing ethical supply chains (see **Table 1**).

Fueling Conflict and Entrenching Illegitimate Power Structures.

In the DRC's current operational environment, any significant injection of new resources, foreign direct investment, or security-related assistance tied to mineral access risks being captured or co-opted by pre-existing power structures, many of which are deeply implicated in corruption, illicit networks, or direct/indirect support for conflict dynamics (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Nigerian Mining, 2025; Hanai, 2021; Africa Briefing, 2025). Without exceptionally robust, transparent, and independently monitored mechanisms to ensure that revenues, benefits, and any security enhancements are managed responsibly and contribute demonstrably to legitimate state-building, community development, and accountable security institutions, such a deal could inadvertently strengthen the very actors and systems that perpetuate instability. For instance, if security assistance, potentially offered under a "minerals for security" framework (Hanai, 2021), is not meticulously ring-fenced, subject to stringent human rights vetting, and directed towards genuinely reformed and accountable units of the FARDC, it could easily be diverted, used to suppress legitimate political dissent, or even empower factions within the security services that have their own illicit resource interests, rather than establishing broad, impartial public order. The DRC's long and tragic history of resource wealth being siphoned off to fuel war economies and enrich predatory elites makes this an acute and highly probable concern (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; McCalpin, 2002). Any deal that does not prioritize the breaking of these cycles is likely to repeat past failures.

The Balkanization Accelerant.

The concern that a major U.S. minerals deal could inadvertently lead to the formalization or acceleration of the de facto balkanization of the DRC is profound and historically grounded (Nigerian Mining, 2025; Africa Briefing, 2025; U.S. Embassy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2024). If the U.S. engages primarily with, or its investments disproportionately benefit, entities (whether state-level provin-

cial authorities or politically connected private actors) that exercise de facto control over specific, geographically concentrated mineral-rich enclaves in the East, without a corresponding and effective strategy to strengthen the central state's legitimate, transparent, and equitable governance over all its territory, it could significantly reinforce existing fragmentation. Deals perceived by local populations and regional actors as legitimizing the economic autonomy or political influence of certain regions, particularly if those benefits are not equitably shared or if they empower actors with secessionist leanings or strong extra-national allegiances, could embolden centrifugal forces and further undermine national cohesion (McCalpin, 2002). The reported U.S.-brokered discussions around potentially allowing or facilitating legitimate Congolese mineral exports via Rwanda, ostensibly as part of a broader peace and trade normalization deal (Discovery Alert, 2025; AEI.org, 2025), must be approached with extreme sensitivity to DRC sovereignty and the complex history of Rwandan involvement in eastern Congo. Such arrangements, if not managed with impeccable transparency and a primary focus on DRC's national interests, could easily be perceived, both internally and regionally, as endorsing or rewarding externally influenced fragmentation and resource plunder.

Human Rights, Environmental Standards, and U.S. Reputation:

The artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector in eastern DRC, while a crucial source of livelihood for millions, is also notoriously rife with egregious human rights abuses, including the widespread use of child labor, conditions tantamount to forced labor, extremely hazardous and unregulated working environments leading to frequent accidents and fatalities, and often direct or indirect links to armed group financing (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Chatham House, 2025). Even large-scale industrial mining projects, such as the KoBold Metals venture at Manono which aims for high environmental and social governance (ESG) standards (Metal Tech News, 2025; IndexBox, 2025), will operate in regional proximity to, and potentially draw labor from areas with, significant ASM activity. Ensuring that industrial supply chains remain entirely "clean" and free from minerals tainted by ASM abuses, or that large projects do not inadvertently displace ASM communities without viable alternatives, is an exceptionally difficult challenge in the DRC context. Furthermore, lithium mining itself, as planned at Manono, carries significant environmental risks, including substantial water depletion in water-scarce areas and potential contamination of local water sources if not managed with cutting-edge technology and stringent oversight (Mining Weekly, 2025). Any failure by U.S. companies or U.S.-backed initiatives to implement, rigorously enforce, and transparently monitor standards that demonstrably improve labor conditions, eliminate child labor, protect community rights, and mitigate environmental damage will inevitably expose these companies and the U.S. government to severe reputational damage, international condemnation, and accusations of prioritizing resource acquisition over fundamental human values and environmental stewardship (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Mining Weekly, 2025; Chatham House, 2025).

Geopolitical Quagmire vs. Strategic Win:

While a central U.S. objective is to diversify critical mineral supply chains and counter China's established dominance in the DRC (de Koning, 2011; AInvest, 2025b; Africa Intelligence, 2025; AInvest, 2025a), attempting direct competition in such a profoundly unstable and complex operational environment is laden with risk. Chinese entities have, over years, developed extensive networks, often operating with different risk tolerances, levels of state backing, and arguably, different ethical and transparency frameworks than those typically expected of Western companies (de Koning, 2011). A U.S. strategy that seeks merely to replicate or displace Chinese influence by outbidding for concessions, without fundamentally altering the terms of engagement towards greater transparency, accountability, local benefit-sharing, and adherence to international ESG standards, could prove to be a costly miscalculation. Such an approach might lead to limited actual strategic gains in terms of secure, ethically sourced minerals, while simultaneously incurring significant financial, political, and reputational liabilities (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; Nigerian Mining, 2025; KnightScholar—SUNY Geneseo, 2019). The Manono lithium project, for example, while holding the potential to supply a significant portion (reportedly up to 15%) of global lithium demand by 2030 if it overcomes its legal and operational hurdles (IndexBox, 2025), thus aiding Western supply diversification, is situated in a historically disputed concession area with existing, significant Chinese corporate interests in an adjacent part of the same vast deposit (Metal Tech News, 2025; Discovery Alert, 2025; Brookings Institution, 2025). This illustrates the complex geopolitical chessboard where U.S. interests will not only compete with China but also navigate intricate local power dynamics and the DRC's own agency in leveraging great power competition for its perceived national interests.

4. Conclusion

The Democratic Republic of Congo's immense mineral wealth offers a tantalizing prospect for U.S. strategic interests. However, this scoping review underscores that the path to any sustainable U.S.-DRC minerals engagement is exceptionally narrow and fraught with severe risks. The nation's deep-seated political instability, pervasive governance challenges, ongoing armed conflicts fueled by resource competition (Cuvelier & Raeymaekers, 2002; McCalpin, 2002), and the de facto balkanization of its eastern territories create a highly volatile environment. A deal focused narrowly on resource extraction or minerals-for-security, without being embedded in a broader strategy to support comprehensive peace, robust governance, and tangible socio-economic benefits for the Congolese people, is likely to fail and could catastrophically worsen existing crises (de Koning, 2011; U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2024; Cooley PubCo., 2024; Mongabay, 2025). The U.S. must champion and see demonstrable progress in an inclusive peace process, fundamental governance reforms, and stringent human rights and environmental safeguards before significant commitments are made. Without

these pillars, any U.S.-DRC minerals deal risks becoming another tragic chapter in the Congo's history of resource exploitation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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