# Civil society warns UK against neocolonial risks in new critical minerals strategy



Civil society campaigners are sounding the alarm over the potential for neocolonial exploitation as the UK government prepares its critical minerals supply chain strategy. This urgent call to action reflects a broader concern that the scramble for essential minerals—such as cobalt, lithium, and nickel—could be veiled in the guise of environmental progress, while effectively serving the interests of wealthier nations and multinational corporations.

The demand for these critical minerals is positioned as indispensable to the green transition, facilitating the manufacture of wind turbines, solar panels, and other low-carbon technologies. However, campaigners argue that a significant portion of this demand also stems from industries with less noble aims, including arms and consumer technology. Cleodie Rickard, policy manager at Global Justice Now, emphasised the need for the UK government to adopt a nuanced approach in its upcoming strategy. “To have a chance at success, the green transition cannot be built on the exploitation of poorer countries by unaccountable corporations,” she stated, urging the prioritisation of minerals necessary for public good over the profits of arms manufacturers.

Looking ahead, the global demand for critical minerals is expected to quadruple by 2040. This escalating requirement has prompted various nations, including the UK, to forge partnerships with mineral-rich countries like Saudi Arabia, Australia, Kazakhstan, and Zambia. These agreements aim to secure long-term access to essential resources but raise significant ethical questions about the potential impacts on local communities and ecosystems. The alarming realities of mining—ecological disruption, water scarcity, workers’ rights abuses, and violations of Indigenous rights—have been well-documented, calling into question the sustainability of such extraction practices without robust safeguards.

Reports indicate that while the US has garnered headlines for its mineral deal with Ukraine, the complexities of executing such agreements are immense, particularly in refining. With China dominating mineral processing—controlling about 90% of rare earth refining—the challenge lies not merely in extraction but in developing the necessary infrastructure for refinement in producer countries. For example, Ukraine possesses vital minerals for progressive technologies yet lacks the capability to refine them, creating a dependency that complicates the landscape of global supply chains.

Moreover, the exploitation of vulnerable populations is starkly illustrated in countries like Nigeria, where child labour in illegal lithium mines flourishes. According to observers, systemic issues—ranging from inadequate education access to rampant corruption—exacerbate conditions that foster child labour. This not only undermines the welfare of these children but perpetuates cycles of poverty in resource-rich areas.

In response to these challenges, campaigners are insisting that the UK's forthcoming strategy must set clear distinctions between minerals essential for the energy transition and those benefitting corporate interests. The proposal includes aligning agreements with international human rights conventions and commitments to a circular economy. Tom Wills, director of the Trade Justice Movement, reinforced this sentiment, stating, “The UK has a responsibility to lead a sustainable and fair global transition to clean energy which prioritises both environmental protection and human rights.”

On the policy front, the UK is signalling a commitment to intertwine climate objectives with its broader industrial strategy. Recent statements from officials like Foreign Secretary David Lammy emphasise that climate action is the defining geopolitical challenge. This approach aims to facilitate the transition to clean energy technologies while supporting economic growth, thereby reflecting a shift towards prioritising both sustainable development and ethical resource management.

As the government moves towards shaping its critical minerals strategy, the calls from civil society groups highlight a critical crossroads: the opportunity to choose a path that champions sustainable practices, respects human rights, and eschews the exploitative tendencies of the past. This potential pivot could help reframe the global narrative surrounding the extraction of critical minerals, ensuring that the drive for green technologies does not result in repeating historical injustices.

### Reference Map

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Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2025/may/15/uk-urged-not-to-exploit-poor-countries-in-rush-for-critical-minerals> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2025/may/15/uk-urged-not-to-exploit-poor-countries-in-rush-for-critical-minerals> - Civil society groups have urged the UK government to address the risk of neocolonial exploitation in its critical minerals supply chain strategy. They highlight that the global rush for minerals essential to hi-tech products, such as cobalt, lithium, and nickel, is often driven by demand from arms and consumer tech industries. The groups emphasize the need for the UK to prioritize minerals necessary for public goods in the green transition, rather than those serving corporate profits.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/df62a6ca-cfa2-4f37-8213-82b03ba61fee> - The article emphasizes that while the U.S.-Ukraine minerals deal symbolizes strategic cooperation, the true challenge lies not in mining rare earths but in refining them—a process dominated by China. Ukraine holds significant reserves of vital minerals like rare earths, lithium, and titanium, which are crucial for technologies such as AI, electric vehicles, and defense systems. However, it lacks the industrial infrastructure needed for refining. China's strategic investments over the past two decades have secured its control over global mineral processing—accounting for 90% of rare earth refining and significant shares of lithium and cobalt. The U.S.’s reliance on Chinese processing is highlighted by cases like MP Materials in California and Japan’s magnet industry, both of which depend heavily on China. Transitioning processing capacity to countries like Ukraine will take years and require overhauls of global supply chains. As the global economy shifts from oil to metals, securing mineral supply chains through refining capacity is critical. China’s head start in investing across the Global South further complicates U.S. efforts. The article concludes that refining, not just extraction, is essential for reducing U.S. dependence on China for critical minerals.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/uk-sign-critical-minerals-partnership-with-saudi-arabia-2025-01-14/> - On January 14, 2025, the UK signed a minerals cooperation partnership with Saudi Arabia aiming to strengthen supply chains, create business opportunities, and attract investments to the UK. This partnership is significant for Britain as it seeks secure, long-term supplies of critical minerals like copper, lithium, and nickel, essential for producing smartphones, electric cars, and data centers for AI development. Saudi Arabia aims to become a major global hub for critical minerals trade with an estimated $2.5 trillion in untapped resources. The deal is part of the UK's broader industrial strategy to boost national security, economic growth, and job creation, and coincides with ongoing free trade agreement negotiations between Britain and the Gulf Cooperation Council. British Industry Minister Sarah Jones led a trade mission to Saudi Arabia with 16 UK companies at the Future Minerals Forum in Riyadh, emphasizing the importance of securing critical mineral supplies for economic growth in her speech.
5. <https://apnews.com/article/22155590dddf7ecc0b9fd55b221c6d9f> - In Pasali, Nasarawa, Nigeria, children like 6-year-old Juliet Samaniya work in illegal lithium mines, earning less than a dollar a day under dangerous conditions, compromising their education. The booming demand for lithium, critical for batteries in clean energy applications, drives this exploitation. Over a million children globally work in mines, with Africa bearing a significant share due to poverty, inadequate education access, and weak regulations. Despite Nigeria's laws prohibiting child labor and mandating education, enforcement is challenging. Corruption and the remote location of many mines exacerbate the situation. Illegal mining operations thrive, often facilitated by informal networks and Chinese businesses accused of labor exploitation. The government has initiated reforms, such as mining marshals and revising legal frameworks, yet the impact remains uncertain. Efforts are needed to ensure responsible mining practices that respect human rights and support child welfare.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/ce6c2cd0-6fd1-4eb9-a17a-686c6e7062ed> - UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy has pledged to place climate action and nature at the center of British foreign policy, creating new special representatives in each area. In a speech, Lammy described climate change and the nature crisis as the defining geopolitical challenge of the era, more severe than terrorism, and essential to the UK's security and prosperity. He announced the creation of a global clean energy alliance to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and technologies, help more countries decarbonize, and foster innovation. This approach contrasts with the previous administration, which backtracked on key environmental goals. Prime Minister Keir Starmer has insisted that his government will be the first major economy to decarbonize its electricity system by 2030. Although this transition may generate tensions in communities, the administration is determined to face the obstacles and promote clean energy as an economic and national security priority.
7. <https://www.ft.com/content/8f070865-e033-4f78-a1c8-a121047536e4> - UK Export Finance (UKEF) will begin providing financing to companies importing critical minerals essential for manufacturing in Britain, as announced by Chancellor Rachel Reeves in the upcoming Budget. This change aims to aid Britain in securing critical materials like lithium, graphite, and cobalt, vital for manufacturing products such as electric vehicles and phones. The initiative targets industries including defense, aerospace, and battery production, with significant investments from companies like Nissan and Tata. This shift aligns with global trends toward renewable energy, necessitating a substantial increase in critical minerals usage. The 'Minerals Security Partnership,' including the UK, European Commission, and 14 nations, seeks enhanced international collaboration in this sector. In the context of a global trade conflict, securing a domestic supply chain for these minerals is crucial. UKEF's new financing option will help bridge existing financial support gaps for manufacturers, ensuring the UK keeps pace with global competitors. This move is part of the broader industrial strategy supporting long-term growth and economic resilience in line with net-zero goals.