

# How Trump and Biden's Focus on Minerals Became Core to U.S. Foreign Policy

China dominates in critical minerals, and President Trump has turned to high-pressure tactics to acquire them.

Credit: A barge on the brine ponds of the Chaerhan Salt Lake in Golmud, China, an area rich in lithium and other minerals, seen in 2021. Qilai Shen for The New York Times

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By [Edward Wong](#)  
Reporting from Washington

President Trump's intense interest in Ukraine's [minerals](#) seemed to come from out of the blue.

He [dispatched](#) his Treasury secretary to Kyiv this month to negotiate with Ukraine's leader, then began ratcheting up the pressure publicly in what appeared to critics like a Mafia don's [extortion scheme](#).

"I want security of the rare earth," he [said](#).

But critical minerals have been on Mr. Trump's mind since at least 2017, when he signed an executive order on them during his first term. They also caught the attention of President Joseph R. Biden Jr.

And Mr. Trump's recent comments on Ukraine's [assets](#) were not the first time in his new term that he has mentioned taking over a country's mineral holdings.

The president has talked about acquiring minerals in Greenland and Canada. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada told a group of business leaders that Mr. Trump's focus on Canada's minerals meant his threats to annex the country were "[a real thing.](#)"

Seizing mineral wealth overseas has become a core foreign policy goal of Mr. Trump's and an impetus for his most imperialistic remarks since taking office. His instincts hark back to the drives of fallen empires, when resource extraction motivated rulers to expand territory.

On Tuesday, after nearly two weeks of difficult talks, Ukrainian and U.S. officials said they had [reached agreement](#) on a framework for sharing revenue from Ukraine's critical minerals.



President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine with Scott Bessent, the U.S. Treasury secretary, in Kyiv, Ukraine, earlier this month. President Trump and his top aides have pushed for Ukraine to share minerals revenue. Tetiana Dzhaferova/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Critical minerals are nonfuel substances that are [essential](#) for energy technologies and at high risk of supply-chain disruption, according to the U.S. Energy Department. They are found around the world — including in Chile and Argentina, the Chinese-controlled Tibetan plateau, and the Democratic Republic of Congo — and are integral to

common technologies ([electric car batteries](#)) and specialized ones (missile systems). In 2022, the U.S. Geological Survey released a [list](#) of 50 critical minerals that ranges from aluminum to zirconium. Because of [competition with China](#), the search for critical minerals has been important to the United States for nearly a decade. Mr. Biden, on the final overseas trip of his presidency, [visited a U.S.-supported railway](#) in Angola that would help [transport critical minerals](#) to the coast for export.

State Department officials in his administration earlier set up a group of allied nations to discuss creating or reinforcing critical mineral supply chains outside of China and established a forum so that mineral-rich countries could speak to potential client nations and foreign companies about developing mines and processing plants.

Ukraine, Greenland and Canada were all part of that. In fact, Ukraine and the United States came close to signing an agreement last fall in which Ukraine would have promised to give the United States a heads up on potential projects, allowing American companies or those of allied nations enough lead time to bid for contracts. The State Department would also have given Ukraine technical assistance on mapping and writing regulations.

That has not been Mr. Trump's approach.

“Trump and his aides are talking in a way that is unnecessary,” said Jose W. Fernandez, who was an architect of the State Department's initiatives on critical minerals in the Biden administration. “These are countries that want investment. But they want partnerships. They are not looking for a colonial relationship.”



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He added that these countries were attracted to American financial and commercial partners because they did not like more coercive options, including proposals from China.



Bucket-wheel excavators mining rare earth materials on Ukrainian soil in the Zhytomyr region this week. Kostiantyn Liberov/Libkos, via Getty Images

Last September, President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine began presenting a [“victory plan” against Russia](#) to allied governments as well as to Mr. Trump, who was running for president, that, among other things, offered partnerships on critical minerals.

Mr. Fernandez was scheduled to sign a memorandum of understanding last October with a deputy prime minister of Ukraine, Yulia Svyrydenko, the State Department said in an email sent to reporters at the time. But on Oct. 29, the day of the scheduled signing, she did not show up in Washington.

Ms. Svyrydenko was then supposed to sign the agreement at a Ukraine reconstruction conference in Warsaw on Nov. 13, but again did not appear.

By then Mr. Trump had won the election, and Ukrainian officials told U.S. diplomats that they preferred to wait to sign an agreement with the incoming administration, according to two former U.S. officials and a Ukrainian official with knowledge of the events.

Ukrainian officials had already been [talking with some foreign businesspeople](#), including Ronald S. Lauder, a cosmetics heir who is a friend of Mr. Trump’s, about investment opportunities in Ukraine’s mineral sector.

Earlier this month, Mr. Zelensky balked at the terms that Scott Bessent, the Treasury secretary, presented to him in Kyiv. The proposal called for Ukraine to give the United States half of its revenues from natural resources, including minerals, gas and oil, as well as earnings from ports and other infrastructure.

Mr. Trump also initially demanded \$500 billion for the United States. He said America deserved payment for the billions in weapons and

budget aid it gave Ukraine during the Biden administration, even though the amount was a tiny fraction of annual U.S. federal spending. Critics called Mr. Trump's terms [rapacious](#), colonialist and mercantilist. U.S. officials tempered some of the demands while continuing to pressure Ms. Svyrydenko and other Ukrainian negotiators to sign a deal. The [current draft framework](#) has a [vague reference](#) to security guarantees for Ukraine, which Mr. Zelensky has said are essential for preventing Russia from trying to launch another invasion after any future cease-fire to end the war. [Mr. Trump said Wednesday](#) that he does not plan to give "very much" of a guarantee.

"Many countries view their natural resources as central to national sovereignty and economic development potential," said Abigail Hunter, executive director of the Center for Critical Minerals Strategy at SAFE, an energy security research group. "This makes negotiations over critical minerals highly sensitive, with governments wary of foreign control or exploitation."





Workers crush cobalt at the Kasulu mine in Kolwezi, Democratic Republic of Congo, in 2021. Ashley Gilbertson for The New York Times

China has been on a yearslong push to develop global dominance in extracting and processing critical minerals. At the same time, the United States has had to import substantial amounts of critical minerals for commercial and military use.



A [report](#) released this month from the Center for Strategic and International Studies noted that the United States imports 50 to 100 percent of each of 41 of the 50 critical minerals listed by the U.S. Geological Survey. China is the top producer for 29 of the minerals. And “China has repeatedly shown its willingness to weaponize these minerals,” the report said — including imposing export controls and bans in the last two years on a range of raw minerals. Furthermore, it said, China now refines between 40 to 90 percent of the globe’s supply of rare earth elements, graphite, lithium, cobalt and copper.

The [executive order](#) Mr. Trump signed in 2017 was intended to “ensure secure and reliable” supplies of critical minerals. The text ordered the secretary of the interior to publish a list of them, prompting the U.S. Geological Survey to post an assessment in 2018 and again four years later.

Some foreign leaders tried to work this angle. Ashraf Ghani, then the president of Afghanistan, [promoted his country’s mineral wealth](#) to Mr. Trump so that the American president would keep U.S. troops in the nation, as the government battled a Taliban insurgency. Mr. Ghani’s bid [failed](#).



Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, center, at a meeting of the Minerals Security Partnership at the United Nations in New York in 2022. President Joseph R. Biden Jr. also focused on securing minerals, though with far less pressure on allied nations than Mr. Trump has displayed. Pool photo by Craig Ruttle

But minerals stayed on Mr. Trump's mind.

In September 2020, he signed an executive order pushing agencies to address the country's "undue reliance" on "foreign adversaries" for critical minerals, namely China.

The disruptions in global supply chains during the coronavirus pandemic heightened anxieties within the U.S. government. Mr. Biden issued an [executive order](#) in early 2021 that, among other things, told the defense secretary to identify risks to the flow of critical minerals from abroad.

The next year, Mr. Fernandez, then the top economic official at the State Department, oversaw the agency's creation of the [Minerals Security Partnership](#), a group of 15 nations looking to broaden global supply chains for critical minerals. The Trump White House and the Indian government [mentioned](#) that group in a joint statement when Mr. Trump met this month with Narendra Modi, the prime minister of India, saying their nations, both members of the group, could collaborate on critical minerals.

Last year, the State Department created a sister forum with 15 producer nations, including Ukraine and Greenland, looking for investors to help grow their industries.

“The bottom line is Ukraine has been pursuing investments for a long time,” Mr. Fernandez said.

So has Greenland.

The forum [held a meeting](#) in November in Nuuk, Greenland, where companies presented seven projects in the country to about 100 potential investors who called in by video.

In his first term, Mr. Trump became fixated on the idea of buying Greenland after prodding by Mr. Lauder, the cosmetics heir.

Another Trump business ally, Howard Lutnick, the president's commerce secretary, has ties to a mining project in Greenland, via an investment made by his firm, Cantor Fitzgerald, in a New York-based



company called Critical Metals Corp., according to securities filings [reviewed by The New York Times](#).



The State Department held a meeting in Nuuk, Greenland, last year of a forum of 15 producer nations, including Ukraine and Greenland, looking for investors to help grow their industries. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

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Some top Trump aides were looking at the strategic dilemma involving China and critical minerals even before the start of this administration.

Last July, Marco Rubio, then a senator representing Florida, cosponsored a bill to tackle the issue. After he became the secretary of state last month, he [wrote in a cable](#) that “energy dominance” would be a priority. It is unlikely that Mr. Rubio and other Trump officials will talk about using the minerals to help address the climate crisis or speed a clean energy transition, which Biden aides had done.

On a visit to the Dominican Republic this month, Mr. Rubio [spoke about](#) the potential for the country’s rare earth minerals to be used for weapons systems and other advanced technologies.

“Having an ally with access to these elements in the hemisphere is very good,” he said. “We want to help develop this wealth of the Dominican Republic.”

**Constant Méheut contributed reporting from Kyiv, and Michael Crowley from Washington.**

**[Edward Wong](#) reports on global affairs, U.S. foreign policy and the State Department. [More about Edward Wong](#)**