



America's mining policy undermines national security

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After nearly two decades of war, the American military must address a readiness crisis. Both Congress and the Trump administration are working to rebuild the military's front-line forces.

But readying America's industrial base to support the force of the future requires further action.

The Department of Defense should be gravely concerned that disruptions in America's mineral supply chain could undermine our national security. The U.S. military uses 750,000 tons of minerals each year to keep our country and troops safe. However, the U.S. is now entirely reliant on other countries for at least 20 minerals needed to build fighter jets, engines, radar, missile defense systems, satellites, precision munitions and other key technologies. These key minerals enable the "overmatch" that Secretary of Defense James Mattis demands, which ensures we can not only win any war, but win it in overwhelming fashion.

Today there is not a single U.S. mine producing cesium, manganese, gallium, fluorspar or graphite. And for many key commodity minerals, the level of dependence on foreign supplies is worryingly high: zinc (82 percent), tin (75 percent), cobalt (74 percent), platinum (73 percent) and lithium (50 percent). Our country is sleepwalking into the same level of dependence on imported minerals that there once was for oil — which became an Achilles' heel for energy security.

Ironically, the U.S. has vast, untapped resources that could support our economic and national security. Unfortunately, the mine permitting process in this country is outdated and redundant, creating a self-inflicted wound that must be healed.

It now takes at least seven to 10 years for a mining permit to be issued. This is unheard of even in other developed countries, such as Canada and Australia, where a mine can be permitted in one-fifth the time. This long, uncertain process drives American companies to invest in foreign mining opportunities, draining jobs and resources that belong here at home.

Minerals such as copper, zinc, and nickel could be extracted in greater abundance domestically, if the U.S. had a less cumbersome regulatory system. But a permitting process that involves duplicative reviews at federal and state levels, often by multiple agencies that are not actively communicating with each other, hampers investment, job creation and national security.

Congress needs to address the mine permitting problem by approving legislation that would streamline the process. Without statutory and regulatory changes, workers, entrepreneurs, and the military will gain little benefit from the estimated \$6.2 trillion worth of minerals currently located within U.S. borders. As our dependence on foreign supplies of strategically important minerals increases, the task of rebuilding our military muscle may be hostage to foreign suppliers.

The permitting problem has already given China a virtual lock on global supplies of rare earth minerals. Though their names may be unfamiliar, elements like neodymium, lanthanum and dysprosium are critically important to the defense industry.



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In 2010, China used its rare earth monopoly to exert leverage over Japan during a diplomatic dispute. We should only expect that the Chinese will use that tactic again when they find it to their advantage. As the president has noted, it is unsurprising that foreign countries are aggressively purchasing and developing their own industries in order to exert significant influence on their peers and competitors. What is disturbing, though, is that so little has been done to level the playing field for our own mining companies.

Streamlining mine permits will not result overnight in American mineral independence. There is much work to be done to overcome decades of neglect for the basic raw materials that power our industrial base. But allowing American miners to get back to work, rather than waiting on multiple, redundant teams of lawyers to pore through thousands of pages of permitting applications, is a positive first step toward strengthening our economy and our military for years to come.

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