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DOMESTIC MINING OF ANTIMOY IS KEY TO U.S. DEFENSE AND ITS ECONOMY

Critical Minerals are crucial to strategic strength

By James "Spider" Markes – Monday, March 2, 2020

ANALYSIS/OPINION:

The strength of a nation is determined by an array of factors: Honesty in global engagements, sharing ideas, finding compromise without loss of identity, unequivocal leadership, developing and nurturing global partnerships, economic largesse, military readiness, predictability under stress, and magnanimity.

Once established, strength diminishes unless it's applied. Applying strength when it's necessary — not just when it's conveniently needed — can only be sustained by reliable access to resources required to power its economy and military. The United States, as an unquestioned global superpower, has long excelled in this — a source of strength that has only grown over the last decade as domestic energy production has surged.

The strategic significance of the United States' emerging energy dominance is difficult to overstate. Growth in both traditional and renewable energy production enables us to rely less on foreign trading partners, to insulate ourselves from global price and supply volatility, and advance our geopolitical goals. Simultaneously, however, our nation has grown weaker, almost anemic, regarding strategic supply chains.

Critical minerals such as antimony are the building blocks of our modern economy and play an indispensable role in everything from consumer electronics and renewable energy to petroleum refining and the chemical industry.

Thanks to its fire-retardant properties, antimony is used in nearly all plastics and paints, and its anti-corrosion properties strengthen everything from batteries and wind turbines to ships and nuclear energy facilities. It also helps with the clarity of glass and is essential to production of solar panels, computer screens and smartphones. These are important applications, but this mineral's role reaches beyond consumer goods and industrial production. Antimony is also vital to our military's effectiveness and has been since it was labeled as crucial to the war effort during World War II. Antimony is a key ingredient in communication equipment, night vision goggles, explosives, ammunition, nuclear weapons, submarines, warships, optics, laser sighting, and much more.

Yet, despite holding extensive domestic reserves, the United States is 100 percent dependent on imports of antimony. This is a grievous self-inflicted strategic wound not only of geography but also of today's volatile trade landscape, creating dependence often on adversarial foreign powers.

China is currently the world's leading producer of antimony, and the United States meets most of its antimony needs through Chinese imports. History — along with today's trade headlines — demonstrates the risk inherent to this dynamic.

The threat has been around for generations, and it's no less prevalent today than it was 75 years ago when Japan invaded China and cut off the United States from its main source of antimony. In 2013, China restricted the export of its antimony over a period of several years — a move that shook the antimony supply chain and not surprisingly pushed prices upward. And today, as trade negotiations between the United States and China continue, the idea of adding additional restrictions to antimony directly influence the debate.

The U.S. government has long recommended a significant strategic stockpiling exercise for antimony as a guard against supply-chain uncertainty, but to date no such stockpiling has taken place. The U.S. military and our global economy remain as vulnerable to supply interruption as ever.

The good news is that we are not, by any means, without known antimony reserves. The Stibnite Mining District in Idaho — which incidentally was our stopgap source of antimony during World War II — is home to at least 180 million pounds of antimony. And while production in the Stibnite has been dormant for many years, a plan for development is moving forward.

The development plan, proposed by Midas Gold, a company of scientists, engineers, environmentalists and community leaders in Idaho, is already deep into the permitting and approval process with the U.S. Forest Service and other authorities.

This project will produce sustainable mining of antimony and gold, which is also found at Stibnite. Midas' plan will exponentially increase domestic production of antimony, reducing reliance on China and making the United States less vulnerable to the unpredictable exigencies of global markets.

What's more, the plan also includes extensive reclamation that will remedy the harm caused by antiquated mining procedures used for many decades. This reclamation will be paid by Midas; there will be no expense to the taxpayer.

The value proposition of the project is high. Thankfully, earlier this year permitting officials overseeing FAST-41, a program aimed at streamlining the timeliness and transparency of federal environmental reviews for critical infrastructure projects, opted to include non-energy mining as a newly-covered infrastructure sector to realize the goal of greater domestic development of critical minerals. The Stibnite Gold Project should be first on the list.

Domestic production of critical and strategic minerals like antimony represents an opportunity for the U.S. to strengthen its strategic position, reducing supply vulnerability and adding stability and predictability to its defense and economic strength.

• *James "Spider" Marks is a retired U.S. Army major general.*

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