

Transcript

Congo international relations

The Congo has vast mineral wealth, its earth packed with ores like copper and cobalt. Cobalt was of limited value until it became a key ingredient in electric car batteries. Around Sixty per cent of the world's supply is thought to be in the Congo.

Beneath the Democratic Republic of the Congo lie an estimated 3.4 million metric tonnes of cobalt. In 2016, the Chinese mining corporation China Molybdenum took control of the huge Tenke Fungurume copper and cobalt mine situated in the south of the country. Four years later, the company expanded its operations, making a major investment in Kisanfu, one of the largest and highest grade undeveloped copper and cobalt deposits in the world.

Both mines had previously been run by an American company, so this was a major shift from dominance by US companies to those based in China.

By 2021, most of the DRC's cobalt-producing mines were run by companies owned or financially backed by the Chinese state. So why does this matter, and what does it show us about the wider picture of contemporary international relations?

Cobalt plays a key role in the clean energy revolution. It's a critical component of the batteries that power mobile phones and electric cars.

A typical electric car has of an array of batteries, and contains up to 15 kilograms of cobalt. The metal plays a vital role in shortening charging time and increasing how far vehicles can travel without recharging.

Promotion of electric vehicles is a core element of policies central to national and global efforts to tackle climate change. The batteries that power these vehicles are mostly made in China, or rely on Chinese supplies of cobalt. And China is increasingly important in the supply of electric vehicles themselves, a quarter of the EU market in 2024.

The Chinese came to Congo with an offer to rebuild the country's infrastructure in return for a large slice of its natural resources.

The relationship with China dates back to 2005 when newly elected DRC President Joseph Kabila agreed a six billion dollar infrastructure deal with China. In return for access to Congo's copper and cobalt reserves, China committed to building railways, roads and schools. The cooperation between the two has been sustained over many years.

However, there were also adverse impacts on individuals and communities arising from what the two countries had agreed.

Workers at the Tenke Fungurume mine claim the change of ownership was linked to a fall in safety standards. There were increasing conflicts between the Chinese owners and workers' organisations. Those raising safety concerns were dealt with harshly, and reporting of incidents suppressed, something the company denied. Both the mining companies and the government used armed force to crack down on local people who tried to steal cobalt to sell on the black market.

Internationally, China's involvement in the cobalt supply chain is causing increasing concern. And it's not just cobalt. There are other minerals crucial to the transition to net zero. For example, nickel, copper and lithium.

Countries across Africa are key producers, with China playing an increasing role.

Western states eventually began to respond to China's increasing dominance. Speaking to electric car manufacturers in Detroit in 2021, President Biden declared an intention to catch up lost ground. In

2022, he issued an executive order to boost domestic production of cobalt, lithium and other key minerals. He also launched a new Africa strategy to renew and develop closer relations with African states, including the DRC.

In his second term of office, President Trump also sought to cut new deals with the DRC. Reports of human rights violations and the extensive use of child labour raised international concerns. In the US and Europe, environmental and labour rights campaigners sought to hold car and mobile phone manufacturers to account for their cobalt supply chains.

Ford announced plans to produce its own batteries in the USA, and Tesla committed to making its supply of cobalt more ethical, environmentally sound and safe.

In the DRC, elections in 2018 had also led to a change of government. New president Félix Tshisekedi maintained good relations with the Chinese government but took a harder line on some of the Chinese investment deals struck under his predecessor, Joseph Kabila. Along with other African states, the DRC also started to explore ways of developing their own mineral processing and battery manufacturing facilities. Acting collectively, they began to use their diplomatic influence in the UN to call for more equitable development of the continent's minerals.

In the words of one DRC delegate, 'our experience of exporting them raw has shown us that there is no benefit for the continent. Africa's minerals are enough to power the clean energy transition, but we don't want to do things how we have done them in the past.'