




The PRC, Feudal Governors and No Accountability

LITHIUM MINING IN ARGENTINA'S NORTHWEST DISTRICT

Douglas Farah

IBI Consultants, LLC
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Introduction

Without doubt, China can lead the agenda and debate for the Global South and push forward an agenda of cooperation and coordination with a multilateral agenda...it is important for China to be part of the discussion because China is the primary commercial partner of many countries, and behind those ties we need ties of understanding to set an agenda that is not necessarily the same agenda as the most powerful countries.
Argentine Foreign Minister Santiago Cafiero¹

China's rapid economic gains and growing political clout in Latin America, often built through opaque agreements with no oversight or accountability, are well documented.² As China has surged over the past decade, U.S. influence in the region is arguably at an all-time low, with a shrinking list of friends and democratic allies, diminishing economic investments, and a dramatic incapacity to stem the erosion of the rule of law and liberal democratic norms. Chinese authorities now warn of inevitable "confrontation and conflict" with the U.S. and U.S. officials view military confrontation as likely in the next five years; it is clear one of the primary theaters will likely be Latin America.

As Gen. Laura Richardson, commander of the U.S. Southern Command stated,

The PRC continues its relentless march to expand its economic, diplomatic, technological, informational, and military influence in LAC (Latin America and Caribbean) and challenges U.S. influence in all these areas...The PRC's ambition to fundamentally revise the world order to serve its authoritarian goals and expand its global influence has triggered a new era of strategic competition with the United States. Our AOR is another front of this strategic competition. Over the past year the PRC and its state-owned enterprises (SOEs) continued to target, recruit, and bribe officials at all levels in the AOR to expand their economic, political, and military influence throughout the region.³

While China has made inroads in most countries in the hemisphere, no country shows this dramatic historical reversal in alliances in Great Power strategic competition than Argentina, where the government of President Alberto Fernández and scandal-plagued vice president (and former president) Cristina Fernández Kirchner (no relation) have not only opened the country to Chinese trade and investment but given the Asian giant almost unfettered access to sensitive areas of national and international strategic interest.

The primary architect of the Argentine open-door policy with the PRC is Kirchner. In her two terms as president (2007 to 2015) and current term as vice president – an office from which she exercises more real power than the president – she has always served as the personal interlocutor of the Argentine relationship with Chinese leaders. She has been formally charged with six major cases of corruption and illicit enrichment and has been convicted of several counts in lower courts. The cases are now on appeal and other cases are still in the trial stage.⁴

Kirchner and several of her provincial allies who run feudal fiefdoms in strategic regions embody a unique combination of attributes that offer a long-term competitive advantage to Chinese state and quasi-state entities in Argentina: The opportunity to engage with corrupt and authoritarian governments both at the national and sub-national level, without consideration for rule of law, environmental impact, indigenous communities, or human rights.

As a recent CSIS report noted, “China has become one of Argentina’s major creditors, offering a source of investment during Argentina’s perennial financing challenges... China’s policy banks have lent \$17 billion for infrastructure development projects in the country since 2007...and commercial banks have entered into 36 agreements in the country.”⁵

While only an estimated 20 percent of the bilateral deals announced with great fanfare are actually underway in Argentina, those of strategic importance are moving apace. In Argentina, the Chinese government, military, and state-linked companies now, among many other activities:

- playing a key and growing role in the strategically vital and lucrative extraction of lithium;⁶
- building a port that will provide gateway access to Antarctica in Ushuaia;⁷
- operating a deep space station over in Neuquén, over which Argentina and international space agencies no oversight or access, with the capacity to interfere with U.S. and EU satellite operations⁸;
- holding billions of dollars in Argentine currency reserves as part of a currency swap to prop up the shrinking Argentine peso, meaning the Chinese currency held by Argentina can only be spent on Chinese goods and services;⁹
- positioning themselves to begin financing new nuclear power plants;¹⁰
- and openly courting Argentina with the offer of advanced fighter jets at discount prices and credit, with the encouragement of Kirchner.

The Role of Provincial Governors

Multiple recent studies have focused on the role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Peoples’ Liberation Army (PLA) and national state-to-state exchanges in the PRC-Argentina relationship. But key to these advances and establishment of long-term domination in Argentina is the PRC’s understanding and utilization of direct contracts with a handful of powerful, corruption scarred provincial (state) governors with iron-clad, almost feudal control of their regions.



Figure 1: Argentina's longest-serving governors, called the rulers of "feudal Argentina" in a recent Infobae report. Gerardo Zamora of Santiago del Estero is back left. (Infobae)

These governors, who rule provinces with key strategic resources, have the constitutional power to directly negotiate deals with Chinese counterparts in extractive industries such as lithium, the widely recognized key to green energy and vital resource for electronics and other technologies. For these projects, contract terms with Chinese or other companies, funding mechanisms, and budgets for billions of dollars remain hidden from the public view and thus from accountability.

IBI Consultants conducted three extensive field visits to Argentina's Northwest Region (*Noroeste Argentino* – NOA) over the past four months to research the workings of these provincial governments, and the strategic impact of their closed political and economic systems on transnational organized crime, impunity, and resource extraction. The first report detailed how the province of Santiago del Estero, a hotspot for irrational economic activities and massive boondoggle projects, has become a key convergence center for regional transnational criminal structures.¹¹

Most but not all of these governors are closely aligned with *La Campora*, the notoriously corrupt factions of the governing *Peronista* Party controlled by Kirchner and her son Máximo.¹² Most of the long-serving governors preside over the poorest provinces in the country, where drug trafficking and violence are rising. In these regions, governors exercise unchecked control of the judiciary, law enforcement and private intelligence structures.

Some governors, like Gerardo Zamora in Santiago del Estero and his close ally Juan Luis Manzur in neighboring Tucumán, have focused on building their own intelligence services, naming subservient judicial authorities, controlling the local media, and forming a tight-knit web of alliances with the owners of provincial banks and construction contractors to gain a stranglehold on the local economy. Zamora and his wife, Claudia Ledesma, alternate in the governorship due to term limits. Whichever one is not governor is elected senator for Kirchner's party and receives senior committee assignments.

The fundamental pact among these governors and Kirchner is that the federal government funnels national resources to these poor regions (with no oversight or accountability) and does not meddle in any regional affairs. In return, these governors deliver massive amounts of votes to the *Peronista* party structures to maintain the power structure.¹³ It is worth noting that many of these provinces, like Santiago del Estero, collect little in state tax revenue, receive some of the highest per capita federal funding levels and remain among the poorest in the country.¹⁴

Over time this has led to crippling clientelist structure where more than half of the jobs in the formal economies of these provinces, along with almost all contracting and economic opportunities, are directly tied to governor, thus allowing the system to perpetuate itself for many years.

Carlos Gervasoni, an academic who has studied the region, calls this the "slanted playing field" phenomenon, where there are elections, but they are neither free nor fair because "the officialist party has advantages that make it impossible to lose."¹⁵ Gervasoni also noted that there is no accounting for the transfers of millions of dollars from the national government to the states. In Santiago del Estero, the trail is even more opaque because one of the banks receiving the funds is partly owned by the province's financial power broker who has supported despotic governors dating back to the 1990s and who also owns the local newspaper, a construction company, and other powerful economic other interests.

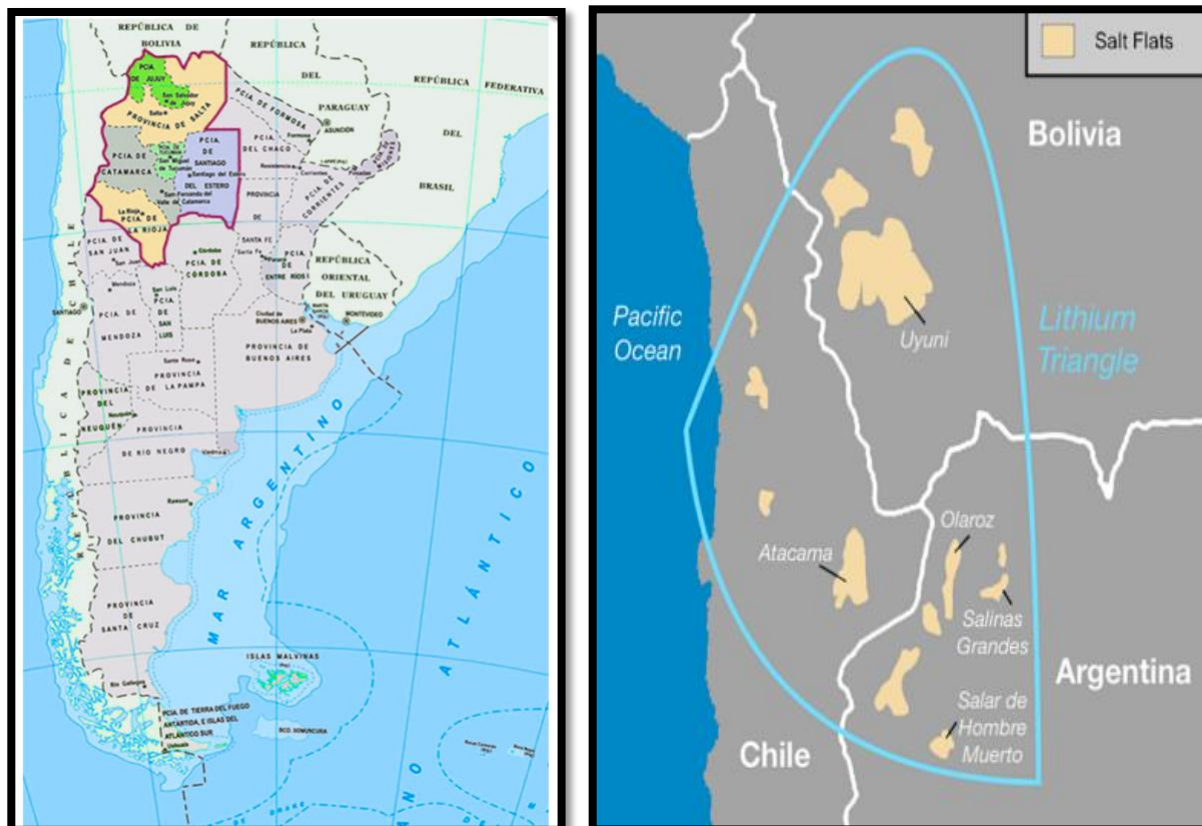


Figure 2: Map of Argentina and NOA region (left) and the Lithium Triangle, including Argentina's Catamarca, Salta and Jujuy provinces (right), Yale University School of the Environment

Argentina's Lithium Advantage: What Makes it Attractive to the PRC

Argentina, along with Bolivia and Chile, form the lithium triangle with an estimated 55 percent of the world's reserves.¹⁶ Of the three countries, Argentina is the farthest behind in its exploration efforts but on track to become the leader in the next 5 years. However, Argentine provinces maintain much higher levels of control over natural resources. This provincial autonomy, in turn, makes Argentina's lithium much more investment-friendly than its neighbors, especially Chile; while Chile considers lithium a strategic resource and its development is tightly controlled at the national level, in Argentina the provincial governors are free to negotiate as they see fit.¹⁷

While the control of the provinces over mineral rights is not new and is guaranteed under the Argentine constitution, it has taken on new relevance in the global competition for lithium, rare earth minerals and commercial fishing.

The value of Argentina's lithium exports jumped from \$206 million in 2021 to \$696 million in 2022. Furthermore, these figures are expected to at least triple in the next five years, making it one of the country's fastest growing economic sectors,¹⁸ and one where tight control over the extraction becomes ever more valuable.

In this context, as described by USSOUTHCOM's Gen. Richardson, the deeply authoritarian *caudillo* (traditional strongman) operational structures of governments of Santiago del Estero (and other

NOA provinces) make the region and its lithium deposits ideal partners for the PRC's authoritarian and often corrupt model of acquiring access to strategic minerals and expanding influence.

Within its borders, there are three key Argentine provinces with lithium deposits: Catamarca (22%), Jujuy (21,45%) and Salta (41%), all part of the NOA. The vast majority of these deposits, like much of the lithium triangle, will be extracted via brine fields. Within Argentina, there is one lithium mine in operation, as well as one in construction; there are 10 more projects in the advanced exploration phase, and 20 more in the initial exploration phase.

While there are companies from multiple nations involved in lithium exploration, the United States, European Union, and Great Britain are at a competitive disadvantage with Chinese operators. In the context of Argentine provinces governed by deep-rooted corruption, the PRC state, as well as private and quasi-government businesses, are not bound by the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act or its equivalent, nor by environmental impact considerations of many other nations. Another key advantage to operating through the provinces, according to one lithium expert, is that it offers the guarantee of stability and durability to Chinese operators who are not bound by anti-corruption laws and practices.

This combination of being shielded by the national government and almost total autonomy at the local level provides China with opportunities to enter into deals with no accountability, no transparency, no environmental impact remediation, and no way to monitor if the traditional corruption practices are in play.¹⁹ Many of these deals among Chinese state and quasi-state companies and provincial governors are not included in the figures of macro-PRC investment because they are signed with the national Argentine government.

While Argentine national politics are in constant turmoil and the chaotic economy often teetering on the edge collapse, national contracts and agreements are reviewed by Congress and are subject to modification and attract international scrutiny. By contrast, provincial agreements remain essentially private arrangements between the governor and the investor, whether it be a foreign government or private entity. Even if the national government changes, the agreements are not affected.²⁰

According to analysts in the region and those who have studied the NOA power structure, five NOA governors usually act as a bloc to protect their regional interests against anything perceived as an outside attack or interference. Only one of the five - the governor of Jujuy province - is not tightly aligned with the Kirchner political power structure, yet even he often acts in concert with the other four in regional politics.

This regional solidarity was recently on display in February 2023 when Manzur, who took a 16-month leave of absence for the governorship of Tucumán to serve as chief of staff for President Fernández, returned to his governorship. In welcoming campaign-style event he was greeted by all the NOA governors together in a raucous celebration.²¹

***Caudillo* Governors and the PRC**



Both Manzur and Zamora have long standing ties to China and have courted Chinese investment for years. In 2022, when he was President Fernández’s chief of staff, Manzur met with the Chinese ambassador to promote Chinese investment in “agriculture, mining, science, technology, innovation, biotechnology and collaboration for international forms.” In 2018 he was part of an official delegation that met with Chinese President Xi Jinping.²²

Together the provincial governments also have created another powerful control mechanism that ensures that indigenous communities and civil society organizations who are not aligned with the power structure remain silenced. This ability to guarantee stability on the ground, where projects would take place, is another key advantage these governors offer.

According to human rights workers, law enforcement officials and intelligence sources, the provincial government allows active-duty police officers to take on additional work for private clients, usually at far higher pay. The side gigs, called *adicionales* or additional shifts, essentially place the police force at the

service of private groups or private security companies tied to the governor.

The security firms in turn are run by retired police officers and often work under the direct control of the province’s police chief. Their primary job is not citizen security, but protection of the interests of the governor and the power structure.

On one recent visit, a uniformed, armed policeman inside a casino owned by a well-known financial partner of the governor, said he was one of 400 officers employed by the casino owner on a regular basis, rather than going on regular patrols or investigating cases. He noted that it was “logical” for the governor and his cronies to use the police because “they are the ones who pay us and have important interests.”

Whatever rumblings of discontent over mining activities or other issues that bubble up, they are reportedly nipped in the bud. The most affected are the indigenous communities in the NOA, who by law control the land and mineral rights on their designated territories. While most do not oppose extractive mining activities such as lithium mining, they are often affected by wastewater runoff and other environmental damage and want a say in how projects are developed.

One human rights worker living in the region said indigenous communities are “caught in the middle of a storm with no one to protect them,” explaining that the traditional landowners have always been in conflict with the communities and that Kirchner, despite portraying herself and her party as protector of indigenous rights, refuses to support the communities. He and others said that communities are told by officials that their rights are outweighed by the imperative to generate revenues for the provincial and national governments.

“When indigenous communities demand a seat at the table to negotiate with extractive companies or demand a halt to the pollution of their natural water systems, the governors respond with these off-

duty troops, who usually are wearing their uniforms and act as policeman,” he said. “The message is clear. You either take money to be quiet, or you are forced off the land or forcibly relocated to land that isn’t affected by the extractive activity. There are no real defenders.”

Conversely, as discussed in our first report, when groups aligned with Kirchner and a loyal governor like Zamora forcibly take over land or other properties to sell or occupy, the same police forces are used to protect them. These land invasions are becoming more frequent.

The environmental damages are growing, according to numerous studies, because it takes more than 500,000 gallons of water to extract a one ton of lithium.²³ Most of the lithium that is being mined and will be mined lies in extremely arid regions, where rainfall is sparse and water a scarce resource. In addition to using massive amounts of water, the salty runoff from ancient salt lakes and aquifers, along with the release of other minerals and waste, is set to explode as lithium mining and exploration expand rapidly. Yet, there are no regulations in place in the NOA, no federal enforcement of environmental laws and a growing sense that, with the agreements already signed, there will be little accountability.

Santiago del Estero’s House of Mirrors



Figure 3: Empty world class speedway in Rio Hondo (IBI Consultants)

Santiago del Estero, sitting in the center of the NOA, has no known lithium deposits but is surrounded by friendly provinces that are the center of extraction. Zamora has ruled the province with an iron fist since 2005, alternating between the governorship and a senate seat; he trades these positions with his wife, Claudia, to avoid term limitations. However, that has not deterred Zamora – known for his extravagant, multi-billion-dollar, economically irrational mega projects – from entering the game in partnership with several Chinese companies, national companies, and local projects, promising to build one of the largest lithium ion battery factories in the hemisphere.

The proposed factory encapsulates the multiple factors at play between feudal governance, a close alliance with national government, and Chinese economic interests. Like many other high-profile but financially questionable jumbo investments Zamora has made since taking power in 2005, economists and analysts in the region say that the economic rationale for the proposed factory is as dubious as the other mega undertakings.

Built on a hot, arid plain where temperatures regularly reach past 100 degrees Fahrenheit during the summer, the city of Santiago del Estero and its environs house a fantasy world of giant projects that rise out of the hardscrabble landscape, sugar cane fields and empty highways, alongside the 46 percent of the population lives in poverty or extreme poverty.

As outlined in detail in our previous report,²⁴ in the middle of one of the country's poorest provinces, Zamora has built the following over the past decade, with no public accountability, oversight or visible economic means or justification for their construction:

- A reported \$3 billion “mega stadium” that was supposed to cost \$986 million.²⁵ The stadium hosts fewer than one event per month, officially named the Mother of Cities Unique Stadium (Santiago del Estero was the first city established by the Spanish in Argentina);
- A multi-million-dollar international airport where there is only one scheduled flight a week;
- A massive new racetrack/speedway to race Indy 500 cars and motorcycles that sits mostly unused – and an accompanying world-class museum of rare race cars and motorcycles.
- A city tram that seldom runs, has no set schedule, and was announced as electric but uses diesel engines.²⁶

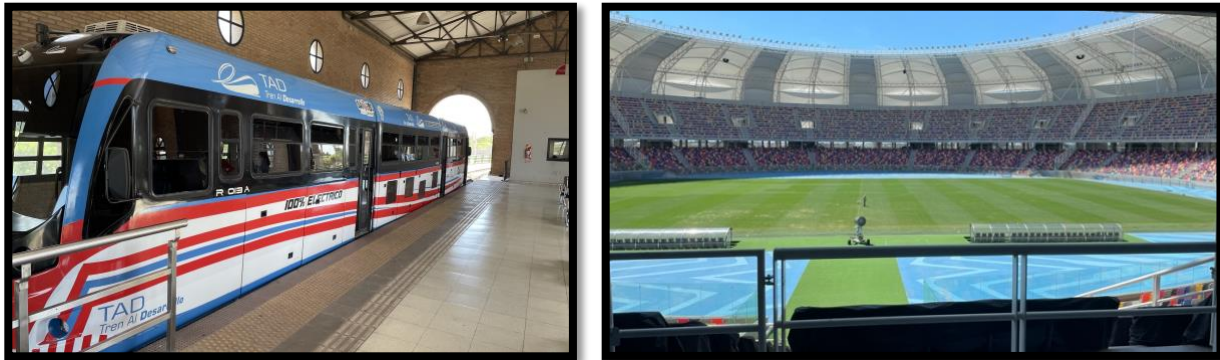


Figure 4: The diesel “electric” train (left) and inside the Unique Mother of Cities soccer stadium (IBI Consultants)



Figure 5: The Rio Hondo Museum of racing cars and motorcycles (IBI Consultants)

One of the few people to use the new international airport at Rio Hondo, about 45 miles outside to the provincial capital, is Zamora, who, according to documents reviewed by IBI Consultants, used public funds to purchase Lear Jets described as air ambulances and a Boeing 737 that is in the United States being retrofitted for special flying conditions. There are extensive media reports



Figure 6: The Rio Hondo speedway (IBI Consultants)

detailing Zamora’s use of provincial aircraft to fly Argentine pesos, constantly devaluing due to rampant inflation, to Buenos Aires to purchase thousands of U.S. dollars as a hedge against devaluation; there are also records of two flights to New Orleans with a stop in Panama, and other non-medical related flights.²⁷



Figure 7: The empty Rio Hondo International Airport (left) and an empty luxury hotel near the Rio Hondo speedway (right) (IBI Consultants)

In this context of complete opacity and deep cronyism, Zamora’s announcement that his province, in collaboration with an Argentine oil company’s lithium subsidiary and three Chinese companies, was creating the “Consortium for Cooperation for the Manufacture of Ion Lithium Cells and Batteries,” has been met with skepticism.

The consortium includes Argentine state YPF company and its subsidiary Y-TEC – under the control of loyal Kirchner allies – along with Chinese partners: Contemporary Amperex Technology Company Co. Ltd (CATL) and Tianqui Lithium and Gotion High Tech. The details of the project’s financing, ownership structure and timeline for completion were vague. No financial documents relating to the project have been made publicly available, there has been no visible bidding process feasibility studies.²⁸

Zamora also announced that the lithium ion plant development would transform the city into a technology hub, expand the Technical Institute of Santiago del Estero, and bring a new university hospital to the industrial campus, all while leaving zero carbon footprint. Again, no financial documents, feasibility studies or details are in the public domain. He said Santiago del Estero was “neutral territory” and therefore ideal for the project.²⁹

Besides the opacity of the multi-millions dollar projects, there are several striking things about the announcement. The first is that the lithium mined around Santiago del Estero first needs to be shipped to China, processed, and then returned to the factory in Argentina, not a cost-effective way to get prime material to the proposed manufacturing hub.

The second is that there is currently no train, only truck transport exists between most of the NOA, including Santiago del Estero, to any Argentine port. Furthermore, a truck can easily take 16 hours to make the trip to Rosario, the nearest major riverine port. Given that lithium is moved in large amounts (Argentina exported 6,200 metric tons of lithium in 2022),³⁰ truck transport would be extremely expensive and inefficient. While a railroad exists, local residents said it has not been functional for a long time.

It is too early to say if any or all parts of Zamora's new mega project will come to fruition or join the landscape of huge, overpriced, and little used projects that have turned Santiago del Estero into the governor's personal playground and piggybank. Massive investments in transport infrastructure could make moving the ore more cost efficient, refining plants could be built nearby to avoid the roundtrip to China, and new laboratories and innovation hubs could spring up. However, Zamora's history with mega projects do not offer reasons for optimism.

Conclusions

The Fernández/Kirchner government is moving rapidly to help the PRC lock in its strategic gains, as many other countries in the hemisphere tilt toward making China their partner of choice. While the Chinese host ongoing multilateral meetings and have strategic 10-year plans for Latin America, the Western Hemisphere section of the Biden Administration's 2022 National Security Strategy does not even mention China.³¹

The difference is reflected in the shifting attitudes. The final declaration of the January 2023 Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) hosted by Argentina – of which the PRC is not a member – stated that the hemispheric group values “the framework of the ‘Action Plan 2022-2024’ for the CELAC-China Forum where we will hold specialized meetings, some at the ministerial level, on...science, technology, and innovation, as well as the China-CELAC Forum Summit in 2024.”³²

The context of the declaration is important. CELAC was founded in 2011 by Hugo Chávez, the late Venezuelan president, as a regional forum to replace the Organization of American States (OAS), which he said was a tool of U.S. imperialism. Because of that, CELAC specifically excludes the United States, Canada, and EU territories in the Caribbean. However, both China and Russia have been granted observer status and the PRC hosts regular meetings of CELAC in Beijing and has a strong say in its agenda.³³

As one recent strategic analysis noted:

The United States needs to address China's ongoing efforts to extend its influence over critical and natural mineral supply chains into Latin America. As the ongoing global shortage of semiconductors has demonstrated, the economic well-being and national security of the United States depends on building secure, resilient, and diversified supply chains for strategically important technologies and the critical minerals that support them. Allowing a geostrategic competitor like China to wield disproportionate influence over access to critical minerals—or allowing production to become concentrated in a single geographic region—poses a serious risk to the United States and its allies.³⁴

Endnotes

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