

Pentagon Plan To Muscle Out China: New Scramble For Africa

By [Tirivangani Masawi](#)

Global Research, May 28, 2011

[Southern Times](#) 28 May 2011

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Windhoek: Southern Africa has become the battle ground for a new scramble for resources, with the United States seeking to muscle out Chinese influence so as to secure strategic minerals – mainly for its military.

More frightening is the possibility of the US military itself becoming involved in securing these strategic minerals within the next 20 years.

According to a study by Dr Stephen Burgess, a Zimbabwean-born associate professor at the US Air War College, Washington may have to enlist the services of the Department of Defence, the National Security Agency and the Africa Command (AFRICOM) to secure Southern Africa's resources.

His study, titled 'Sustainability of Strategic Minerals in Southern Africa and Potential Conflicts and Partnerships', says the US should move quickly to secure Southern Africa's uranium, manganese, platinum, chrome, cobalt and rare earth minerals for America's industrial needs and for its military as well as maintenance of weapons systems.

The study focuses on resource accessibility in the DRC, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe and draws parallels with the 1880s scramble for Africa.

To triumph in this new scramble, Burgess notes, 'all instruments of (US) power' must be deployed.

Burgess visited all these countries – except Zimbabwe – and makes recommendations on how the US can muscle out China.

He interviewed mining sector experts, government officials and journalists as part of his research.

There were also consultations with American institutions such as the Defence National Stock Pile Centre, the Defence Logistics Agency and the Marine Corps Command.

A note in the study indicates that it has nothing to do with the US Air War College, raising the possibility that Burgess was working as a consultant for Washington.

'Southern Africa contains strategic minerals, which the USA and its allies require for industrial purposes and that militaries need for production and sustainment of weapons systems.

'The principal sustainability challenge in SADC for the USA and its allies is uncertain access to strategic minerals.

'The cause of this challenge is increasing global demand and supply shortages caused by inadequate infrastructure, politicization of the mining industry and China's aggressive and sometimes monopolistic behaviour in pursuit of minerals.

'The challenge is most acute in two Southern African countries – South Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – and also growing in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Namibia.

'Of particular concern is possible future conflict between the United States, which needs strategic minerals for national defence and other purposes, and China, which needs an increasing amount of resources to fuel its accelerating industrialization.

'There is a rising scramble for and struggle over resources in Africa, especially in petroleum and mining economies.

'In particular, the US government is concerned about access to 'defence critical resources'. This requires increased levels of engagement with the African countries concerned, using all the instruments of American power and working with American and Western mining companies, as well as engagement with China and Chinese companies.

'In the future, a 'worst-case' scenario might see the United States having to use coercive diplomacy in the not-too-distant future (perhaps in 10-20 years) in order to regain access to vital resources.

'The onset of 'resource wars' has been predicted by a number of scholars and experts. Given the rising level of Chinese demand for resources, the probability of conflict is likely to rise.

'The new scramble for African mineral resources (and petroleum) is most similar to the 19th century European scramble for African minerals and land that contributed to interstate conflict, especially the First World War.'

The ever-strengthening Sino-Africa ties are a major headache for the US and Washington must move quickly or else conflict will become unavoidable.

'The United States produces a range of materials from strategic minerals, including warships, aircraft, and high tech devices and components.

'Thus far, the United States and its allies have relied on free market forces in Southern Africa and elsewhere. However, US and allied industries may not always have access in the future and may have to reduce output or even close. For example, a worrisome problem has been Chinese control of production of more than 90 percent of rare earth minerals.

'Recently, Chinese companies withheld them from Japan over the Senkaku/Daioyu Islands dispute and threatening to withhold them from the United States over arms sales to Taiwan.

'The minerals are the ingredients in key components in communications devices, satellites, and electric fuel cells and batteries that US industry and the military require.'

Burgess says liberation movements (ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe, ANC in South Africa and SWAPO in Namibia) are politicizing the mining sector to the detriment of free marketeering and this will pose a serious challenge to the US. Issues of black economic empowerment and nationalization of mining feature prominently.

‘The free market and government taxation of mining profits have tended to provide optimal conditions for states and industry and maintain a steady flow of minerals to meet demand. However politicization has occurred in the form of nationalisation of the mining industry and the intervention of black empowerment companies which have tended to disrupt the market and flow of minerals.’

The DRC, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe all have – or in the process of implementing – policies that will see greater indigenous participation in mining.

- South Africa

South Africa is targeted for its vast platinum resources which stand at about 75 percent of global production, as well as its vast manganese deposits.

‘South African President Jacob Zuma and Mineral Resources Minister Susan Shabangu have said that nationalization is not currently part of government policy.

‘However, this does not guarantee it will not be part of government policy in the not-too-distant future. The ANC Youth League managed to get nationalization onto the agenda of the governing party’s September 2010 meeting, fuelling investor worries.

‘Nationalization of South African mines has been given renewed prominence by the ANC Youth League, which in 2009 issued a discussion paper arguing for state control of 60 percent of new mines.’

- Democratic Republic of Congo

The DRC is viewed as a source to quench America’s thirst for cobalt, uranium, coltan (columbite and tantalum), tungsten, tin, and rare earth minerals.

The study says Gecamines, the state miner, has too much control of mining and appears to favour dealing with China over the West.

- Zambia

Zambia’s cobalt constitutes 20 percent of global deposits and it is second only to the DRC.

Again, emphasis is on Beijing’s growing presence in Zambia through integrated firms such as the China Railway Group, SinoHydro and the Metallurgical Group Corporation.

- Namibia

Naturally, America’s interest here is in uranium and there is unease about the activities of the recently created state miner, Epangelo.

Namibia’s Cabinet recently said all future mining of strategic minerals should be done in partnership with Epangelo.

Namibia is the fourth largest producer of uranium and global demand is rising faster than the demand for gold.

'The recently established state owned mining company, Epangelo has virtually no capital and may look to Russian and Chinese companies for support.

'Kalahari Holdings (a SWAPO firm) are ... looking for uranium prospects and joint ventures, possibly with the Chinese and Russian companies.

'In the long run the politicization of the mining sector could divert uranium to China.'

Recommendations

'One measure the United States could take is to assist South Africa in developing beneficiation. US aid could help to develop local mineral processing and metal manufacturing and assist South Africa in developing sufficient electricity to power such ventures.

'In addition, the United States could negotiate off-take agreements with South Africa and provide assistance to benefit local mining communities.

'The United States could encourage American mining companies to reengage in South Africa and work with Australian, Canadian and South African companies that are committed to the free market.

'Also, the US government could step up strategic communications, broadcasting Chinese abuses and dissuading forces in the ANC and SWAPO from moving their governments closer to China.'

Burgess goes further.

'In order to shape the region to maintain the free market, there are a number of actions that the United States and its allies might take. They might use diplomacy to build strategic partnerships with the most important African countries...

'In the case of strategic minerals, special attention must be paid to South Africa and the DRC.

'The United States and its allies could develop military-to-military relationships with a number of strategic African countries. The US National Security Council, DOD (Department of Defence) and (the) US Africa Command might develop contingencies to deal with the eventual prospect of resource cutoffs and the possibility of conflict over strategic minerals. At issue is how US agencies might adjust to the forthcoming challenges.'

The building of strategic partnerships is politically difficult, given the ANC regime's rejection of AFRICOM during the stand-up process in 2007 and 2008.

'South Africa is the hegemon in the region and must fully accept AFRICOM before military-to-military partnerships can be built throughout the region.

'The United States also continues to apply sanctions against President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and his inner circle, which makes building partnerships with the Southern African

Development Community difficult.

'In addition, there is some resistance to US foreign policy from the (President Joseph) Kabila regime in the DRC; SWAPO in Namibia; and the (President Eduardo) dos Santos regime in Angola.

'By 2020, US intervention, including AFRICOM, might be needed to ensure sustained US/allied access to strategic minerals, which means that the building of strategic partnerships in the next decade is important.'

Dr Stephen Burgess farmed commercially in Zimbabwe's Masvingo Province and ceded land during the government's agrarian reforms. He left Zimbabwe in 2001 and works for the Air War College in the United States. He is the author of three books; 'South Africa's Weapons of Mass Destruction' (with Helen Purkitt), 'Smallholders and Political Voice in Zimbabwe', and 'The United Nations under Boutros Boutros-Ghali, 1992-97'.

Burgess helped lead in the organization and execution of the Air Force Africa Command Symposium.

He is an associate director of the US Air Force Counterproliferation Centre. Burgess holds a PhD from Michigan State University and has been a faculty member at Vanderbilt University, the University of Zambia, the University of Zimbabwe, and Hofstra University.

The full study can be found on <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/>

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