

Trump's "critical minerals" conference aimed against China

Nick Beams
5 February 2026

The intensification of the economic and tariff war by the Trump regime against China last year revealed a significant weakness in the position of US imperialism.

It is now trying to overcome it as the preparations for military conflict—regarded by many sections of the American intelligence and military establishment as inevitable—continue.

Through its dominance of the global supply of rare earths and critical minerals, vital for high-tech products, from phones to jet engines and weapons, China was able to hit back against Trump's tariff war by rapidly cutting off supplies.

This forced a US backdown and the announcement of a tariff war truce for at least 12 months. But this did not mean the war was over. Far from it. The Trump regime is now desperately seeking to organise global supply chains that bypass China, to be in a better position to resume hostilities when it considers the time is ripe.

This was the purpose of the convening of the inaugural Critical Minerals Ministerial by the US State Department and its head, Marco Rubio, in Washington this week, attended by representatives of some 50 countries.

In his opening remarks to the meeting, US Vice President JD Vance did not refer directly at any stage to China but made clear its domination of critical mineral supply was front and centre. "I think a lot of us learned the hard way, in some ways, over the last year how much our economies depend on these critical minerals," he said.

His remarks focused on the failure of market mechanisms to promote the processing of these minerals outside China. Without blaming China directly, he pointed to a situation where a project is announced, following years of planning, and then overnight "foreign supply floods the market, the prices collapse and investors pull out."

But apparently the problems go deeper because in the US, "even with all the incredible things that President Trump and the entire administration has done," some projects are struggling to attract investors.

Declaring that everyone at the meeting was "on the same

team," Vance said the aim was to create a market worthy of the countries that depend on it.

Rubio developed a theme which has been at the centre of the Trump economic agenda. First, mining was ignored and then run down, followed by manufacturing which was outsourced, and this had to be turned around because as Trump made clear from his first day in office, "economic security is national security."

On the eve of the gathering, Trump announced that the US would establish a stockpile, named Project Vault, of "essential raw materials" across the US that could be tapped by manufacturers in time of need. It will be financed with \$2 billion of private capital and \$10 billion from the US Export-Import Bank, the largest allocation of funds it has made in its history.

The fund will buy key minerals, not only rare earths but other metals, such as copper and lithium, which companies will be able to draw upon for a fee in emergency situations.

The development of such a stockpile, however, only has a limited effect. The key issue is securing continuous supply.

That was the aim of the meeting—to establish partnerships with the US and create a supply chain for some 60 minerals which the US Geological Survey has deemed "vital to the US economy and national security," and which face potential disruption.

Reporting on the outcome, the State Department said the US had signed bilateral framework agreements or memorandums of understanding with 11 countries. But significantly, they were mainly smaller powers—the tiny Cook Islands was one—and no agreements were reached with major European countries.

In the lead up to the gathering, Politico, basing itself on State Department cables it had obtained, and the anonymous comments of diplomats, published a report indicating it is not going to be plain sailing for the US in constructing an anti-China bloc.

For the European powers, Trump's attempt to annex Greenland in one way or another is a major bone of contention. Denmark, which controls Greenland, declined to

send a representative to the meeting.

One European diplomat told Politico that “we are all very wary,” and the framework of Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s plan “will not be an easy sell until final clarity on Greenland.”

The State Department said reliable supply chains were indispensable to all the attendees, and that “we must work together to address the issues in this vital sector.”

But given the actions of the Trump regime, there are major trust issues and a reluctance to take part. At this stage, the US wants participants to sign a non-binding framework agreement that would give it access to critical minerals.

The template for the framework is the agreements with Australia and Japan and the language used in memorandums of understanding with Thailand and Malaysia last year.

The agreement with Australia, which is regarded by the US as a vital cog in its war preparations against China, was signed during a visit by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese last October. Underscoring the significance of the agreement, Albanese said it was an historic elevation of the alliance with the US which has been in place since World War II.

Under the agreement, both parties are to identify and subsidise priority projects related to the supply of critical minerals and to commit to providing at least \$1 billion to the development of new projects.

The Australian company Lynas Rare Earths is already playing a key role, having established a processing plant in Malaysia. Lynas is now regarded as having the largest commercial facility for the separation of crucial heavy rare earth elements outside China.

Processing of rare earths is the key question, for despite their name they are relatively plentiful in many cases. But the problem is separating them from other elements with which they are found—a costly and often environmentally dirty process. At present, China has around 70 percent of rare earths but processes around 90 percent of them, a situation which has led to rare earths mined in the US being sent to China for refining.

Not surprisingly, given Australia’s role, the Australian Security and Policy Institute (ASPI), a voice for the military and security establishment, hailed the meeting as “just what we need.”

It said the calling of the meeting by Rubio was a “clear signal that critical minerals have moved from a sectoral concern to a macro-strategic problem.” And it identified China as the central problem, because as Trump’s tariff truce revealed, “concentrated processing capacity exposes importing states to coercion, supply disruption and strategic leverage.”

As usual in such presentations, reality is stood on its head.

The coercion came not from China but from the US with the massive tariffs, aimed at trying to cripple its economy, introduced by Trump. What ASPI and other such imperialist think tanks find so galling is that China took measures to push back.

ASPI maintained that those concerned with the shifts in US policy—tariffs and Greenland—could argue against them while still working with the US to constrain China.

Some states like Australia have signed on. The Philippine and Polish governments have also agreed, according to cables by both countries, cited by Politico, that were sent to Washington last month.

Asian countries that have close trade relations with China are far from committed at this point. Trump’s threat to impose a 100 percent tariff on Canada, if it signs a free trade deal with China—an implicit warning to others—and his move to re-impose a 25 percent tariff on South Korea, because it is dragging its heels on the framework deal signed last year, is making them nervous.

According to the Politico report, Finland and Germany, both members of the European Union, have both expressed reluctance to sign on without clarity on the broader relations between the EU and the US.

A January 15 cable from Finland said it “prefers to observe progress in the EU-US discussions before engaging in substantive critical mineral framework negotiations.” Germany has also expressed concern that the US initiative may bring “potential retaliation from China.”

In line with the truce with China, which Trump is hoping will enable the US to buy time and ensure that it is never again cut off from critical minerals, there was no overt anti-China rhetoric from Vance and Rubio. It was all about international cooperation and collaboration—demonstrating the truth of the old saying that the devil himself is always able to quote Scripture.

But given the importance of this issue for the US drive to subjugate China, one can be sure that the heat will be turned up against it, as well as against “allies” if they fail to come on board with the latest US initiative.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact