POLICY BRIEF

GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME



NEW ROUTE, OLD NETWORKS

Organized crime along the Lobito Corridor

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CENTRAL AFRICA OBSERVATORY
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Summary

The Lobito Corridor, which links the copper and cobalt mines of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Zambia to the port of Lobito in Angola, is one of the largest infrastructure investments under way in Central and Southern Africa. Backed by the European Union and the United States, it offers a direct rail route to the Atlantic for minerals essential to the energy transition, electronics and defence industries, whose supply chains are largely controlled by China. It also promises investment in agriculture, energy and industry that could benefit the populations of Angola, the DRC and Zambia.

However, the corridor runs through one of the mining regions most exposed to transnational organized crime, including smuggling, corruption and elite capture. Securing the corridor cannot be separated from the security and governance of the mines that feed it, or from respect for the rights of those who work in them. Organized crime already operates widely in these mines, and illegally mined critical minerals already enter legal supply chains. If nothing changes, the same networks that control extraction may also come to control how those minerals reach the market. This policy brief examines how the corridor could impact the region's illicit mineral economy, mapping the risks from mine to port. Those risks include illegal extraction on industrial concessions, protected by members of the security forces and the political elite; a growing reliance on private security contractors with unclear accountability; organized hijacking and extortion on roads; misdeclaration of cargo at borders, and influence campaigns by state actors seeking to discredit the project.

These risks are growing as the context shifts. In Washington and Brussels, the language of the energy transition has given way to that of supply security: the corridor is now tied to bilateral minerals deals, while due diligence rules are being eased. Competition with the China-backed Tanzania–Zambia Railway (TAZARA) prioritizes speed over scrutiny. Unless integrity is built in while the DRC and Zambian sections are still being financed, the corridor risks becoming a faster, Western-backed route for minerals of compromised origin into the very supply chains that Europe and the United States seek to secure. If these risks are left unaddressed, producing countries, some already under heavy debt, would meanwhile lose the revenue they need, but also the opportunity to turn the corridor into a driver of development – processing more of their minerals locally, creating jobs and building a more solid tax base.

Key recommendations

To strengthen governance across the corridor and shield it from capture by organized crime, this policy brief makes the following key recommendations, detailed further below:

- The DRC and Zambia should make tackling organized crime in the mining sector a priority, including within the institutions meant to protect it: investigating members of the security forces and officials who shield illegal extraction; ensuring that the armed forces and any private security contractors they hire, including under minerals-for-security deals, operate under clear legal mandates; vetting and overseeing contractors, and keeping security forces off artisanal mining sites.
- The DRC and Zambia should give artisanal miners a legal route to market, through viable artisanal zones connected to transparent, audited buying centres.
- The DRC and Zambia, with Angola, should protect the revenue the corridor generates and prepare to follow the money before traffic peaks, by disclosing corridor-related borrowing and including the corridor in their national money laundering risk assessments.
- Funders should use their remaining leverage to tie financing to integrity milestones.
- Rail terminals should become traceability checkpoints, with destination countries reconciling their imports against export data.
- The EU and the United States should apply the standards they promote to the deals and funds they control directly.



Half built, already contested

The DRC and Zambia hold some of the world's largest copper and cobalt deposits,[1] and the DRC is home to one of the largest hard-rock lithium deposits, at Manono,[2] which recorded its first export in July 2026.[3] As the energy transition drives demand, securing access to these minerals has become a strategic priority for Europe and the United States, which seek to diversify supply chains largely controlled by China.[4] For the EU, the stakes are direct: Brussels has mobilized €2 billion for the Lobito Corridor, which is operated by European-based companies and meant to feed European industry.[5] In total, the corridor's backers have pledged more than US$6 billion.[6]

The backbone of the corridor is the Benguela Railway, which runs for some 1 300 kilometres from Lobito to the Congolese border. In 2022, Angola awarded a 30-year concession for the Benguela Railway to the Lobito Atlantic Railway consortium, made up of Portuguese group Mota-Engil, commodity trader Trafigura and Belgian operator Vecturis.[7] In October 2023, the EU and the United States signed a memorandum of understanding with Angola, the DRC and Zambia to develop the corridor.[8]

Three years later, the corridor is working, but only in part.[9] The first shipment of Congolese copper concentrate reached Lobito from Kolwezi in eight days in December 2023, against some 25 days by road to Durban (South Africa), the traditional route. In April 2026, the first copper anodes refined on site at Kamoa-Kakula travelled the same route on their way to Europe.[10] Yet only the Angolan section is in good working order, and volumes remain modest: the railway aims to carry around 400 000 tonnes in 2026,[11] half of it Congolese copper and cobalt – a small fraction of the more than 4 million tonnes of copper the DRC and Zambia produce each year.[12]

Beyond Angola, much of the corridor has yet to be built or rebuilt. In the DRC, the line operated by the national railway company, SNCC, is severely degraded:[13] on the Dilolo–Kolwezi stretch, trains run at 10–15 kilometres per hour and use less than 5 per cent of the line's capacity.[14] In the DRC, a 30-year concession to rehabilitate the Dilolo–Sakania line was only awarded to Mota-Engil Africa in August 2026, with financing not yet committed.[15] The Zambian extension,[16] a new line of some 830 kilometres to Chingola, has yet to break ground: the African Development Bank approved a first US$255 million loan in August 2026, but the Africa Finance Corporation, which leads the project, expects financial close only by the end of 2027 and completion around 2030, and has secured only half of the cargo commitments

needed for viability.[17] As traffic shifts from road to rail, the illicit networks that operate along today's routes are unlikely to disappear; the period before the corridor reaches full capacity is the moment to ensure they do not follow.[18]

The corridor is meant to be more than a route for minerals. The governments of the region see it first as a way to open up their economies. At the Lobito summit in December 2024, Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema described it as of 'vital importance to opening up our countries, to opening up our regions', adding that 'this project is a huge opportunity for investment, for trade'.[19] The DRC and Zambia agreed in 2022 to build a joint battery and electric vehicle value chain, and in 2023 Afreximbank and the UN Economic Commission for Africa signed a framework agreement to establish special economic zones for this purpose in both countries, so that more of the minerals are processed locally rather than exported raw.[20]

The corridor's international backers present it in similar terms. The EU's Global Gateway strategy lists sustainable agricultural value chains, renewable energy, vocational training and job creation among its components, and in November 2025 the EU signed agreements worth €200 million with Zambia covering rail upgrades, agriculture and market access, and a solar power plant.[21] The African Development Bank's financing for Zambia's section also aims to build capacity for agricultural, energy and urban development.[22] For Angola, the World Bank describes the corridor as a 'unique transformative opportunity to accelerate economic diversification' while stressing that realizing this potential 'depends more on institutional reforms than on infrastructure investments'.[23]

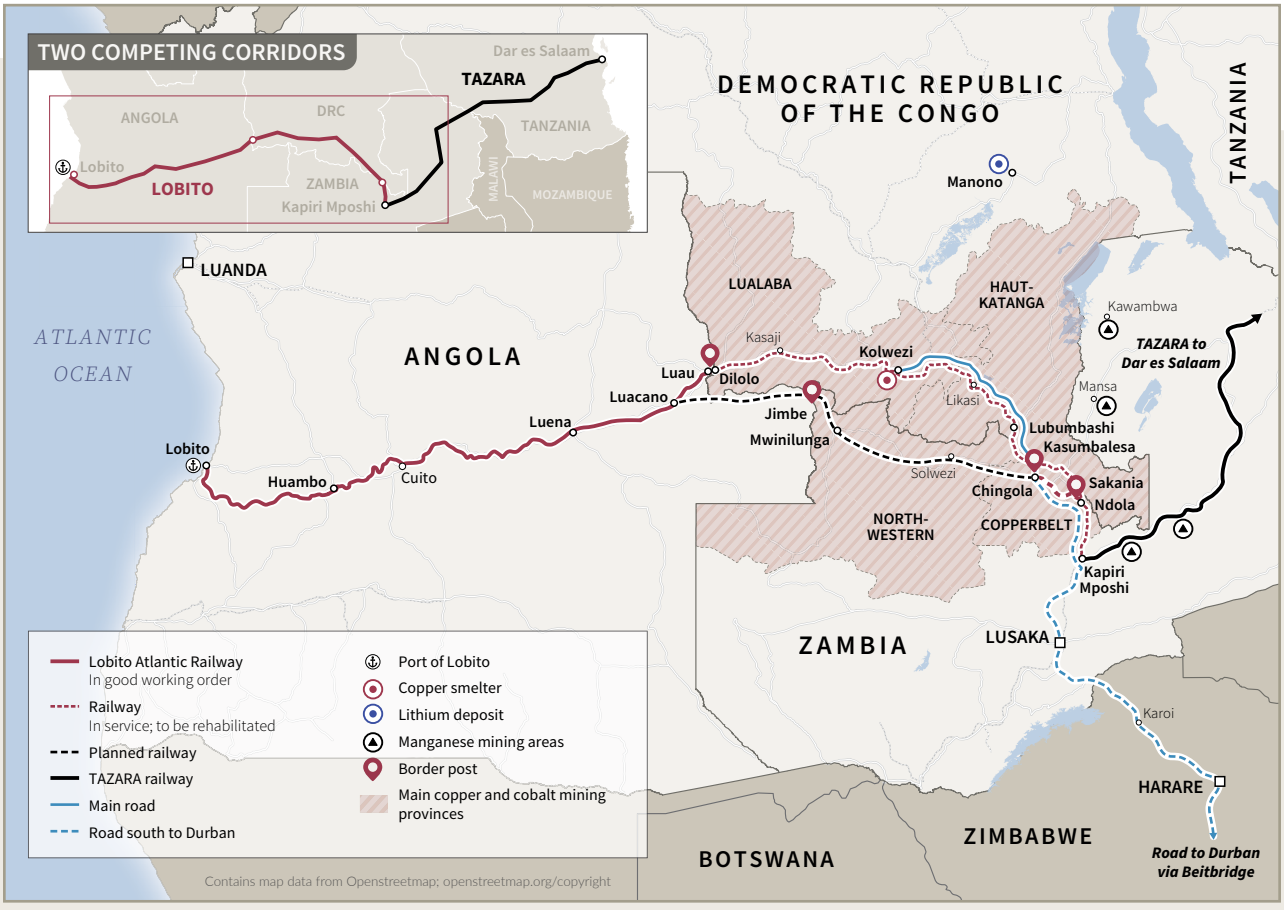


FIGURE 1 Central African minerals export routes.

This brief does not question that ambition. It examines one critical condition for achieving such potential that has received little attention: whether the corridor can be shielded from the criminal networks already embedded in the mining economy that justifies the investment. If those networks capture the minerals, the revenue and the routes, the wider development promise is unlikely to follow.

One corridor, diverging agendas

The corridor was conceived in a geopolitical context that no longer exists. In October 2025, two years after the EU signed the corridor's memorandum of understanding, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced RESourceEU, a plan to secure Europe's access to critical raw materials in response to their 'weaponization' by dominant suppliers.[24] The plan does not name the Lobito Corridor, but it relies on the same instruments: Global Gateway investment and the EU's strategic raw materials partnerships, including those signed with the DRC and Zambia in 2023.[25] On both sides of the Atlantic, the language of the energy transition has given way to that of supply security.

However, securing critical minerals was part of the corridor's purpose from the outset. In the United States, the Biden administration presented it as the 'start of creating a diversified supply chain route for the critical minerals' needed for the energy transition, but surrounded it with accompanying measures in agriculture, energy, health and digital connectivity in the countries along the corridor.[26] The Trump administration has kept the objective but shifted the emphasis: much of the development component, including USAID programmes in Angola, the DRC and Zambia, has been cut,[27] and the corridor is now tied to bilateral minerals deals. As a US official said, the change lies less in the objective than in the weight given to it.[28]

The clearest expression of this shift is the US–DRC Strategic Partnership Agreement of December 2025.[29] It grants US companies a right of first offer on strategic mining assets and sets a five-year target of routing half of the DRC's copper exports and nearly a third of its cobalt through Lobito.[30] The first list of priority assets Kinshasa offered under the agreement reportedly included Rubaya, one of the world's largest coltan sites, in the east of the country, far from the corridor, currently controlled by the Rwanda-backed March 23 Movement (Mouvement du 23 mars, M23) armed group.[31]

Not all producing countries have accepted such terms. In May 2026, Zambia, whose section of the corridor is only partly financed, refused US terms that tied up to US$2 billion in health aid over five years to preferential access for US companies to its copper and cobalt.[32] It signed a five-year health agreement in October only after the two files were formally decoupled; a separate minerals deal is still under negotiation.[33]

Kinshasa, by contrast, expects US support against the M23, effectively trading minerals for security, a model that has been found to yield limited results.[34] The conflict in the east unfolds in a different context from the Copperbelt, but it offers a warning: there, outsourced security contracts have been awarded through patronage networks, with commissions worth tens of millions of dollars, and have become a driver of violence rather than a remedy.[35] More recently, the government has contracted Erik Prince, the founder of the private military company Blackwater, whose teams have reportedly been deployed alongside Congolese forces fighting the M23, providing them with drone surveillance.[36] Under a five-year contract concluded with the Congolese government in December 2024, his teams were initially tasked with improving tax collection in the mining sector, and now operate at mines around Kolwezi, at the start of the corridor.[37]

A particular risk arises when security providers are funded from the revenue they help secure. Recent arrangements in the DRC have linked the two directly, with the mining component of a contract meant to finance its security component, and a mining 'police' envisaged to collect revenue from the extractive sector.[38] Such arrangements tie the funding of a private armed actor to the revenue it raises, giving it a direct stake in what it collects and blurring the line between securing the state's income and extracting it, with no clear independent oversight of how that revenue is obtained.[39]

More broadly, the UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries warned in 2019 that security arrangements in the extractives sector worldwide are 'complex and often opaque', mixing public and private actors without 'a clear, precise and legally defined role for each security actor', which makes abuses hard to trace.[40] In Haut-Katanga and Lualaba, the Congolese NGO AfreWatch has documented killings, torture and other abuses committed between 2017 and 2020 by both private guards and public forces assigned to mining sites.[41]

The risks do not stop at the mine: how minerals are bought downstream matters just as much. The EU still frames its support around sustainability goals, but in practice it now shares the same priority as the United States – securing supply – and the two differ mainly in method. Washington secures access through bilateral offtake deals; Brussels plans to buy minerals collectively and stockpile them, while easing supply chain checks.[42] The European Environmental Bureau has warned that joint purchasing without proper due diligence could bring minerals of unverified origin into European stockpiles – a risk that is particularly acute for a region where illegally mined and stolen copper and cobalt already enter legal supply chains.[43]

Competition will not dismantle the region's criminal economies; it is more likely to redistribute them.

Greater coherence across Europe's institutions and member states would strengthen the security and governance of the supply it seeks. One study has noted that the current lack of it 'makes it hard for Zambia to grasp how the EU operates',[44] an observation echoed by several people interviewed for this brief, who pointed to the EU's institutional fragmentation as a barrier to understanding its approach.[45] Without such coherence, there is a risk that organized crime networks gain a foothold along the entire supply chain – from the mine and the trading depots to the roads, the rail, the border posts and the port of export.

While Europe and the United States are still building their access, China already holds much of the supply chain, with stakes in 15 of the DRC's largest copper and cobalt mines[46] and dominance of global refining.[47] It has responded by reinforcing the eastern route, with a US$1.4 billion deal in 2025 to modernize TAZARA, linking Zambia to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.[48] Chinese operators interviewed described close relationships with local power structures as a key competitive advantage in an environment where access to opportunities depends heavily on such ties. They also pointed to the absence of a coherent Western strategy, and some expected that any waning of US engagement would leave China more room to consolidate its position.[49]

Admittedly, the longer-term ambition is to connect the two networks through Zambia.[50] As then US Secretary of State Antony Blinken put it in September 2024, 'the ultimate goal is infrastructure connecting the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean'.[51] Likewise, Tanzania's ambassador to Angola has described a corridor that 'starts from the Port of Lobito, crosses Zambia and reaches Tanzania'.[52] For now, however, the more likely outcome is two competing routes drawing on the same mines, each backed by rival partners.[53] Competition alone will not dismantle the region's criminal economies; it is more likely to redistribute them, as minerals of compromised origin tend to follow the weakest controls.



Mapping the risks

A corridor does not only carry goods. It also creates flows, revenue opportunities and nodes that criminal networks can exploit.[54] Existing analyses have focused on the Lobito Corridor's commercial and geopolitical stakes,[55] and on its governance and accountability challenges,[56] and security assessments have flagged criminal risks along its routes.[57] Below we examine how the corridor could reshape the region's illicit mineral economy, from mine to port, drawing on fieldwork, research on security outsourcing in the DRC and a forthcoming report on critical minerals and organized crime in Central Africa.[58]

Upstream: minerals already captured

The main risk lies not on the tracks but in the mines that feed them. In the Copperbelt, the threat comes less from armed groups than from those meant to protect the mines. In Lualaba and Haut-Katanga, in the DRC, illegal extraction on industrial concessions has grown into a quasi-industrial operation generating an estimated US$2 billion a year, reportedly protected by members of the security forces, provincial authorities and individuals linked to the political elite.[59] In Lubumbashi, productive artisanal sites have been reportedly cleared of diggers, at times by force, and handed to the business partners of politically connected figures, operating under the protection of elite security units, while officials responsible for oversight are paid to look away.[60]

The pattern is not new. After soldiers evicted some 10 000 artisanal miners from Tenke Fungurume in 2019 – a 1 500-square-kilometre concession in Lualaba, one of the world's largest copper and cobalt mines located on the corridor's route – some reportedly stayed on to extort entry fees, while others mined illegally for the benefit of senior officers.[61] Mining companies are also part of the equation: in July 2026, the commander of the military region covering Lualaba acknowledged that some operators call in soldiers to guard their interests or intervene in concession disputes.[62]

In Lualaba, a mapping of 51 artisanal sites carried out in 2025 by the International Peace Information Service and the Kolwezi-based organization Initiative Bonne Gouvernance et Droits Humains, together with the government's artisanal mining agency, found the Congolese army present on 64 per cent of them.[63]

Soldiers mainly imposed illegal taxes, seized production and monopolized the sale of goods to diggers, and in some cases pre-financed mining themselves, while unauthorized state services sought a share of revenue on most sites, according to the study.

Some 200 000 diggers work copper and cobalt deposits – many in hand-dug tunnels prone to deadly collapse, without basic protective equipment and alongside an estimated 40 000 children.[64] Only a minority work legally, in the few authorized artisanal mining zones or through formal cooperatives; most dig on industrial concessions or unauthorized sites, outside any legal framework. Their output is sold to trading depots and processors with little traceability.[65] The DRC government has recently stepped up efforts to crack down on domestic and foreign networks involved in illegal mining in Lualaba.[66] However, it remains too early to determine whether these actions signal a sustained policy shift.

The risk is not limited to these two minerals. In Zambia, manganese output doubled between 2023 and 2024, much of it mined without licences or by foreign investors hiding behind Zambian nominees.[67] Nearly half of the workers surveyed in a US-funded study were in forced labour, and because mills mix ore from different suppliers, none of it can be traced back to the mine.[68] Manganese has now begun moving through Lobito: as the corridor's mineral basket widens, so does the range of supply chains exposed.[69]

Once mixed with legal production, these volumes become almost impossible to distinguish, and the corridor would lend them legitimacy: the faster and more internationally backed the route, the more attractive it becomes as a channel into supply chains marketed as 'responsible'. EU safeguards are poorly suited to this risk: the 2017 Conflict Minerals Regulation does not cover copper or cobalt,[70] and due diligence obligations under the 2025 Batteries Regulation have been postponed to August 2027.[71] Safeguards on critical minerals were already weaker than those on gold; they are now under pressure to be relaxed further in the name of securing supply.



An artisanal cobalt and copper mining site in Kolwezi, DRC. Some 200 000 diggers work copper and cobalt deposits in the country, many without protective equipment. *© Michel Lunanga/Getty Images*

Along the roads: organized theft and hijacking

Most of the region's copper still moves by truck from the mines of the DRC and Zambia, through the Kasumbalesa border post and across Zambia to the ports of Dar es Salaam and Durban – the routes the Lobito Corridor aims to bypass. In the DRC, these convoys have become targets. In July 2025, copper loads worth around US$6 million each were hijacked near Tumbwe, north of Lubumbashi, by armed men using unmarked vehicles and military-style radios.[72] Police are reportedly complicit, allegedly offering to 'recover' the stolen trucks for around US$50 000 and the hijacked copper for a fee of 10 per cent of its value (around US$600 000).[73] At checkpoints, police, soldiers, tax agents and inspection units all take their cut:[74] truckers are stopped 10 to 16 times between Kolwezi and Kasumbalesa, reportedly paying between US$300 to US$1 200 in bribes.[75] Drivers pay the highest price: in early 2026, several Zambian drivers were reported missing or killed in the DRC,[76] in attacks that Zambia's trade union federation attributes to 'criminal groups and, in some cases, individuals in uniform'.[77]

The pattern extends across the region. In Zambia, trucks carrying Congolese cathodes have been found abandoned and emptied near Kasumbalesa,[78] and in July 2026 a former provincial police commissioner, a magistrate and police officers were charged with stealing cathodes after they had been recovered at the Mokambo border.[79]

These are not isolated incidents. Taken together, they point to organized networks able to coordinate surveillance, logistics and protection, with complicity inside the security apparatus.

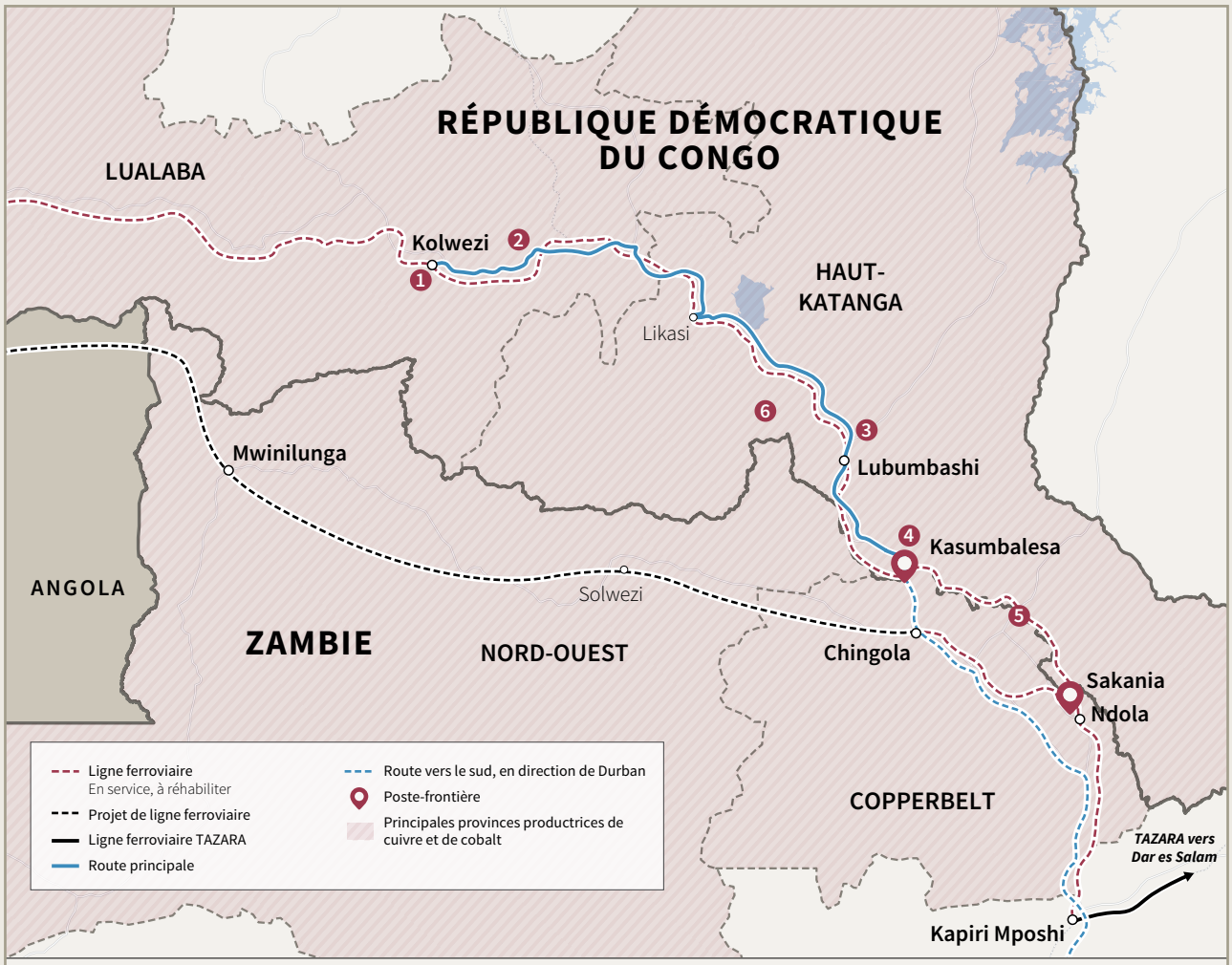
At the borders: where illicit becomes legal

Border crossings are where illicit flows are most easily passed off as legal ones. Because copper and cobalt move in bulk, smuggling relies less on concealment than on misdeclaring origin, weight or content.[80] According to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, the DRC's control points are marked by 'widespread misreporting and limited traceability'.[81] The results can be striking: researchers estimate that 2 000 to 5 000 tonnes of undeclared uranium left the country inside cobalt hydroxide shipments between the years 2000 and 2024.[82] Stolen copper crosses borders the same way: in June 2026, South African police and INTERPOL seized 121 tonnes stolen in Zambia and smuggled through the Beitbridge border post with Zimbabwe, using forged customs documents, false number plates and serial numbers filed off to conceal its origin.[83]

New restrictions are adding pressure: the DRC's cobalt export quotas are expected to push more of the trade into Zambia, where intermediaries are already waiting to buy,[84] and in June 2026 Kinshasa reaffirmed a long-standing but repeatedly waived ban on exports of copper and cobalt concentrates, while leaving the mines minister discretion to grant one-year exemptions.[85] The Lobito Corridor will create a new potential illicit hub at Dilolo–Luau, between the DRC and Angola, where efforts to align Congolese and Angolan customs procedures and share data have made slow progress.[86] Faster crossings could reduce the delays officials exploit to extract bribes, but if speed is not matched by stronger checks, illicit cargo will benefit as much as legal trade.



Trucks queue to cross into the DRC from Kasumbalesa, Zambia. Border crossings are key vulnerable hotspots for minerals trafficking. *© Zinyange Auntony/Bloomberg via Getty Images*



1 July 2025 — Metalkol concession, Kolwezi (DRC)
Several foreign nationals and Congolese accomplices arrested for illegal mining; local sources allege protection by soldiers and individuals claiming ties to the political elite.[87]

2 15 November 2025 — Kalando mine, Mulondo (DRC)
On 15 November 2025, at the Kalando mine in Lualaba, gunfire from soldiers sparked panic among artisanal miners, and a makeshift bridge collapsed, killing at least 32 people.[88]

3 July 2025 — Tumbwe (DRC)
In July 2025, near Tumbwe, north of Lubumbashi, attackers using unmarked vehicles and military-type radios hijacked copper loads worth around US$6 million. Police allegedly offered to recover the stolen trucks for US$50 000 and the copper for 10 per cent of its value.[89]

4 July 2023 — Kasumbalesa (DRC)
About 120 tonnes of copper cathodes from the Tenke Fungurume mine disappear; the commander of the regional military command is arrested.[90]

5 March–July 2026 — Mokambo border post (Zambia)
436 cathodes diverted into Zambia and recovered by police are later auctioned; former Copperbelt police chief, police officers, a magistrate and a court clerk charged.[91]

6 Early 2026 — DRC copper routes
In early 2026, several Zambian truck drivers were reportedly hijacked in the DRC and at least four went missing, prompting a Zambian drivers' union to suspend trips into the country. Zambia's trade union federation later blamed the attacks on 'criminal groups and, in some cases, individuals in uniform'.[92]

BEYOND THE COPPERBELT

4–9 August 2025 — Nakonde (Zambia–Tanzania border)
30 tonnes of cathodes loaded in Ndola disappear; driver switches off GPS; trailer found abandoned in Tanzania, 4 kilometres from the border.[93]

June 2026 — City Deep, Johannesburg (South Africa)
121 tonnes of copper stolen in Zambia using forged customs documents, cloned plates and filed-off serial numbers seized by South African police and INTERPOL.[94]

FIGURE 2 Selected incidents reported along the copper export routes the Lobito Corridor aims to bypass, 2023–2026.

NOTE: None of the incidents involve cargo along the corridor itself, but many occurred along its future Congolese section, revealing the criminal ecosystem in which it will operate.

Who gets access?

The race for supply is also shaping who gets access to the region's minerals. The first major deal under the US–DRC agreement, the acquisition of Chemaf's copper-cobalt assets in Kolwezi and Lubumbashi, went to Virtus Minerals, a firm whose executives come from security and intelligence backgrounds and which overstated its mining experience, according to Reuters.[95] Upstream, access is often bought rather than earned: in December 2025, the DRC suspended all artisanal copper and cobalt processing after finding that permits had been obtained through bribery.[96]

A publicly funded corridor cannot ignore who controls the resources it carries.

Left without accountability or incentives for responsible investment, the corridor risks attracting the actors best equipped to exploit it: those with long experience of operating in, and profiting from, the region's illicit economies, while operators bound by due diligence stay away. A publicly funded corridor cannot ignore who controls the resources it carries.

Geocriminality: the corridor as a target

The Lobito Corridor may also be a target of geocriminality – the use of criminal practices by states in pursuit of strategic objectives.[97] A media consortium including The Continent, Forbidden Stories, openDemocracy, Dossier Center and iStories has shown that in 2023 and 2024 Africa Politology – the influence arm of the Wagner Group until it came under the control of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) in December 2023[98] – ran coordinated actions against the corridor in Angola, the DRC, Namibia and South Africa.[99]

Confidential documents from Africa Politology reviewed by the authors refer to 'assistance from the SVR' in reaching 'individuals who have access to the Angolan president'. The aim was to 'counteract the political influence of the United States and EU countries' in Angola and to promote 'the issue of Western countries' neo-colonial motivations in the exploitation of the Lobito Corridor'. For the EU, this makes Lobito part of the hybrid threat landscape it seeks to counter on its own borders. According to the documents, corroborated with interviews with DRC officials,[100] the campaign pursued four lines of attack:

- Undermining the corridor's economic viability: in September and October 2024, the operation circulated a letter attributed to the executive director of Gécamines, the DRC's state mining company, stating that it would not use the corridor because of the 'high prices' set by the Lobito Atlantic Railway and would favour the Congolese port of Banana instead.
- Exaggerating safety risks, by amplifying rail accidents and claiming that the Lobito Atlantic Railway was sabotaging passenger services, with a risk of 'train collisions'.
- Casting the corridor as an instrument of US domination, designed to push Angola 'into a deep debt crisis', and portraying China as the more reliable partner, claiming that the United States had 'not a single successful example of an infrastructure project implemented in Africa'.
- Stoking local resentment, by pitting the consortium against Angola's historic state railway company, the Caminho de Ferro de Benguela, and its employees, and by portraying Angolan companies as excluded from the project.

Its techniques included fake documents, fabricated interviews, paid commentators and manipulated local media. The documents claim a reach of several million people for each campaign, figures that should be treated with caution. Some of its content was picked up by local media and political actors, including branches of Angola's main opposition party.

The campaign served interests Moscow shares with Beijing, since discrediting Lobito strengthens the case for TAZARA. There is no evidence of direct coordination, but analysts have long described the relationship between Moscow and Beijing as a partnership of convenience, and their information operations in Africa have converged in the past,[101] with Chinese platforms amplifying Russian content.[102]



Discrediting the Lobito Corridor strengthens the case for the China-backed Tanzania–Zambia Railway, pictured above. *© Tony Baldwin/Getty Images*



The race for volume versus standards

The Lobito Corridor was meant to give Europe and the United States a cleaner, more secure supply of critical minerals. It may end up doing the opposite. The networks that capture mines, hijack convoys, falsify export documents and corrupt border officials are already in place, and the corridor offers them a faster route to market, with the added legitimacy of Western backing. Competition with TAZARA, the push for rapid returns and a shared turn towards supply security in Washington and Brussels all point the same way: volume first, traceability later. The US has weakened leadership on conflict minerals due diligence by supporting efforts to repeal section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, a cornerstone of global 3Ts governance.[103] In the EU, member states signed off in February 2026 on a simplification package that limits corporate due diligence obligations to the very largest companies and delays their application to 2029.[104]

The question is no longer whether organized crime will exploit the corridor, but how far its networks will spread along it. The paradox is stark: a corridor built to reduce dependence on opaque supply chains risks becoming one of them. Left to criminal networks, it would cost both sides dearly. Producing countries would see their minerals leave faster while the revenue flows to illicit networks, and with most processing done abroad, little would remain for long-term development.[105] That loss would hit public finances already under strain: Angola rebuilt the Benguela Railway largely on Chinese credit and its debt is projected to reach its legal ceiling, while Zambia, still restructuring its debt, is borrowing to build its section.[106] Revenue lost to theft and smuggling is revenue these countries cannot use to repay what the corridor has already cost them. Importing countries would pay even more: for the infrastructure, for tainted supply chains and for the instability that captured mineral economies fuel.

Recommendations

The Lobito Corridor can bring real benefits to the populations of Angola, the DRC and Zambia. But the networks that capture mines, routes and revenue siphon off much of the value that investment is meant to create, before it reaches state budgets, local economies and communities. Tackling them is

not a condition imposed from outside but a precondition for the region's own development: it would allow these countries to turn their mineral wealth into jobs, industry and public revenue, and to weigh in on the international stage as partners shaping the energy transition, not merely as suppliers of raw materials. Rail also offers something roads never could: a limited number of loading points, operators and border crossings, which makes the mineral trade easier to see and to control. Whether the corridor strengthens governance or rewards criminal networks will be decided now, while the DRC and Zambian sections are still being financed and built.

The following recommendations aim to strengthen governance along the corridor and to shield both the corridor and the minerals trade from capture by transnational organized crime.

- **Tackle organized crime at the source.** These networks drain the value the corridor is meant to create, starting in the mines that feed it. The DRC and Zambia should prioritize tackling organized crime in the mining sector, including within the security forces: investigating officers and officials who shield illegal extraction, with military prosecutors pursuing members of the armed forces and the commanders who tolerate their involvement; withdrawing the armed forces from mining sites and from unauthorized checkpoints along export routes; and ensuring that any security forces or private security contractors deployed to protect mines or convoys, including under minerals-for-security deals, operate under clear legal mandates and independent monitoring. Contractors should be vetted on their track record, and companies or individuals with a history of human rights abuses or economic crimes should be excluded. Security arrangements should not shield the networks they are meant to fight.
- **Investigate across borders.** Securing the corridor against organized crime requires investigations that follow networks across borders, as the networks themselves do. Angola, the DRC and Zambia should set up a dedicated joint unit to fight organized crime along the corridor, with a specific mandate, vetted police and customs officers, and military prosecutors to handle cases involving members of the armed forces, coordinated through the Southern African Regional Police Chiefs Cooperation Organisation and INTERPOL's regional bureau in Harare. To guarantee its independence, the unit should have secure, predictable funding, set in advance and independently audited.
- **Turn rail terminals into traceability checkpoints.** Unlike thousands of trucks, a railway has a limited number of loading points. Mine-of-origin, weight and content data should be recorded and verified there, through systems shared by Angola, the DRC and Zambia. Destination countries should then systematically reconcile their import records with this export data, so that discrepancies in volume, value or origin are flagged and investigated. In this way, the corridor would become the most reliable route to market rather than the fastest route for laundering.
- **Manage the shift from road to rail.** The networks that hijack trucks and extort drivers will not disappear when traffic moves to rail; they are likely to adapt to it. Joint investigations by Congolese, Zambian and Angolan police and customs, supported by INTERPOL, should target the organizers of theft and smuggling and their protectors within the security forces, and anticipate other illicit flows, such as drugs and arms, as container traffic on the corridor grows. Drivers and diggers, who are more often victims of these networks than their beneficiaries, should be protected rather than prosecuted, with safe channels to report extortion and violence.
- **Follow the money and protect the revenue.** As traffic grows, so will the illicit financial flows the corridor can carry: protection payments, bribes, misinvoiced exports and laundered proceeds. Before it reaches full capacity, Angola, the DRC and Zambia should include the corridor in their national money laundering risk assessments and enable their financial intelligence units to share information. They should also disclose all corridor-related borrowing and guarantees, avoid debt

its revenues cannot repay, and publish annual estimates of revenue lost to theft and smuggling. Destination countries should share import, payment and beneficial ownership data with producing countries, since much of the evidence of laundering sits in their own financial systems, and help recover criminal proceeds, part of which should go to communities in mining areas.

- **Use the window of leverage.** Financing for the DRC section is not yet committed, and Zambia's is only partly in place. Funders should release the remaining funds in stages, each tied to measurable integrity milestones (such as published contracts, functioning traceability and vetted security arrangements), rather than attaching conditions after the money has gone.
- **Make transparency the corridor's best defence.** Publishing concession contracts, offtake agreements, beneficial owners and transported volumes would deter capture. It would also take the ground away from influence campaigns that thrive on opacity. Funders should support an independent corridor-wide integrity monitor, with civil society, journalists and researchers from the three countries reporting publicly every year.
- **Destination countries should match investment with standards.** Minerals of compromised origin are not secure supply: they expose buyers to legal, reputational and political risks, and they finance the networks that destabilize producing regions. In line with their G7 commitments, the EU and the United States should apply integrity requirements first to the instruments they control directly. For the United States, that means the minerals its companies acquire under the US–DRC agreement and the corridor projects financed by its Development Finance Corporation. For the EU, it means RESourceEU's joint purchasing and stockpiling and its Global Gateway investments: no public money or public purchase should be tied to minerals whose origin cannot be verified. The EU should also extend due diligence requirements to copper and cobalt and resist further delays to the Batteries Regulation. The United States should maintain conflict minerals disclosure rules. Finally, both should give Central and Southern Africa a place in their raw materials diplomacy that matches its weight in their supply chains, engaging producing states on governance and not only on access.



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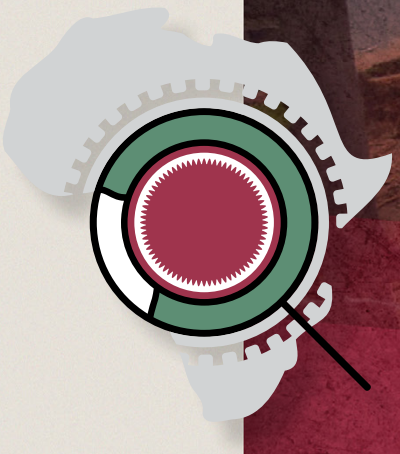
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