
COMPETITION FOR CONTROL OF RARE EARTHS TRIGGERING GREAT POWER CONFLICT IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Three developments over the past month highlight an important new reality in geopolitics. First, Russian forces occupy a significant lithium deposit in eastern Ukraine, meaning Russia now has greater reserves of that rare earth mineral than the United States (Window on Eurasia, January 16). Second, the United States has established sanctions on a Russian lithium mining facility near Murmansk that the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) is helping Moscow develop (The Barents Observer, August 1, 2024, January 16). Third, Washington and Kyiv have been discussing a deal in which the United States will continue to support Ukraine with its defense needs in exchange for Kyiv's agreement to give the United States access to Ukrainian rare earth deposits (Reuters, February 5; Kyiv Independent, February 7). Control of access to rare earth minerals is critical to the development of the most advanced technologies, and the denial, or at least dominance, of such access to others now lies behind the strategic thinking of major powers.

That reality may be most clearly evident regarding Ukraine, where the Russian invasion continues. It extends, however, far beyond that country and increasingly involves Central Asia, where the contest between the East and West has been intensifying not only because of the PRC's dominance in the rare earth field but also because of Beijing's expansion into Central Asia. This region contains many of the largest, but as of yet underdeveloped, rare earth fields in the world, but its governments need outside help to develop the rare earth sector (U.S. Department of the Interior, March 2018; Cabar.asia, March 29, April 3, 2024; Daryo, February 8). While some consider that the PRC is so far ahead in Central Asia that it cannot be challenged, the stakes in this competition are so great that the United States and European Union have begun to challenge it and are having some success. The United States and European Union can offer greater investment and expertise with fewer strings attached than the PRC and its ally Russia. Central Asian states want to diversify foreign investment in this sector lest the PRC use an exclusive position to dominate them in ways they believe they can avoid by incorporating additional partnerships, which may countervail the PRC's presence (see EDM, June 13, 2024).

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