

JEUNE AFRIQUE ÉCONOMIE

US and China Compete Over African Copper and Cobalt Export Corridors

Saga deep read · 06 July 2026 · Score 50

A strategic contest is intensifying across Sub-Saharan Africa as the United States and China compete to control the infrastructure corridors that move critical minerals — primarily copper and cobalt — from the continent's interior to global markets. The rivalry centres on two distinct corridor projects: the Lobito Corridor, running through Angola and supported by Western interests, and the TAZARA rail corridor linking Tanzania and Zambia, historically built by China and now subject to renewed Chinese attention. Both routes connect landlocked mineral-producing regions to Atlantic and Indian Ocean ports respectively, making them pivotal to the global energy transition supply chain.

Copper and cobalt, extracted in large volumes from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia, are essential inputs for electric vehicle batteries, wind turbines, and grid-scale energy storage. Securing reliable, cost-effective export routes for these materials has become a geopolitical priority for both Beijing and Washington, each seeking to ensure their domestic energy transition industries are not dependent on corridors controlled by the other. The corridor competition is therefore as much about supply chain sovereignty as it is about infrastructure development.

The Lobito Corridor has attracted significant US and European backing, with the route seen as a counterweight to Chinese-built infrastructure across the region. By contrast, the TAZARA corridor — originally constructed in the 1970s with Chinese financing and labour as a Cold War-era project — is once again receiving Chinese investment interest, positioning Beijing to maintain influence over an alternative

export route. The parallel development of both corridors reflects a broader pattern of great-power infrastructure diplomacy playing out across the African continent.

For resource-producing countries in the region, the intensifying rivalry creates leverage but also complexity. Governments in Angola, Zambia, the DRC, Tanzania, and neighbouring states must navigate competing offers from powerful external actors while attempting to maximise domestic benefit from their mineral endowments. The risk of corridor dependency — where export infrastructure is financed and operated by a foreign power — is a recognised concern among African policymakers seeking to balance investment attraction against sovereignty over strategic assets.

The battle of the corridors also has direct implications for the broader energy and infrastructure services sector. Large-scale rail rehabilitation, port expansion, and logistics infrastructure require the same project finance structures, engineering expertise, and operational capacity that characterise major oil and gas developments. As capital flows into these corridors, parallel investment in power generation, fuel supply, and industrial services along the routes is expected to follow, creating a broader development footprint across southern and eastern Africa.

Why this matters to partners and clients of Saga

Norwegian service companies should monitor corridor development closely, as port expansions at Lobito and Dar es Salaam will require subsea and marine engineering services alongside conventional civil works. Pipeline and power infrastructure serving mining hubs along both corridors represents a realistic entry point for Norwegian firms with African project experience. The geopolitical momentum behind both corridors signals sustained capital commitment, making early partner identification and local presence-building a prudent near-term step.

PARTNER ANGLES

- **Pipeline:** Fuel and slurry pipeline opportunities are likely to emerge along both corridors as mining output scales, warranting early market assessment.

- **Subsea/FPSO:** Port infrastructure upgrades at Lobito and Dar es Salaam may require marine and nearshore engineering services where Norwegian firms hold competitive expertise.
- **Service:** Power generation and industrial utilities serving corridor mining hubs represent a concrete service opportunity as corridor investment accelerates.
- **LNG:** LNG as a fuel source for heavy mining and rail operations along remote corridor sections is a viable commercial angle worth exploring with corridor developers.
- **Drilling:** Mineral exploration drilling activity in DRC and Zambia is likely to increase as corridor logistics improve, creating demand for well services and drilling support.

[Original source: Jeune Afrique Économie →](#)

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