



RESOURCE SECURITY WATCH

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
Changes to the Global Strategic Environment

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Related Categories: Energy Security; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Australia; Southeast Asia

A STRATEGIC MINERALS SOLUTION DOWN UNDER

The United States and Australia have signed an agreement to expand cooperation in the sphere of strategic minerals in a deal with significant national security implications for both countries. Materials such as lithium power laptops, smartphones, lasers, and other technologies, and the agreement is aimed at diversifying both countries' supply of and access to these resources as a way of remaining independent from China. The PRC is currently the global leader in the production of strategic minerals, outpacing both Washington and Canberra by almost a factor of ten. Amid ongoing trade tensions between the U.S. and China, continued access to these resources has become more questionable – and the possibility of some sort of conflict over them more likely.

One factor that has allowed China to outproduce the entire world in this sphere is environmental. The cultivation of such minerals pollutes water and gas, as well as creating harmful byproducts such as ammonia. Thus far, the United States has not been willing to disregard the environmental impacts associated with mass cultivation, forcing Washington to look for ways to challenge China's monopoly in the industry, particularly in the South China Sea. (*ABC News Australia*, November 18, 2019; Reuters, November 20, 2019)

INDONESIA'S QUICKSILVER AND EASY GOLD

Illegal mercury production in Indonesia has been providing the world with a cheap and easy method to mine for gold. However, the practice – which involves smelting cinnabar (the brick form of mercury) and using it to bind together nuggets of the precious metal before burning it off – has been linked to birth defects, neurological issues, and food-borne poisonings across the island nation. After western countries scaled back production of mercury due to environmental concerns, local smelters have been flooding the market with homemade varieties that pollute the air and water, contaminating fish and other staple diet items. Shipments of mercury have reached as far as South Africa and India, countries with vast gold deposits. Indonesia's high rate of corruption has only exacerbated the problem. As the use of illegal mercury grows in these impoverished regions, experts anticipate increased pollution-related health issues among the local population in these places. (*New York Times*, November 19, 2019)

GLOBAL FIRES STIFLE LOGISTICS

Climate change has led to a dramatic increase in the number, intensity, and frequency of wildfires around the world, putting coordinated efforts to fight the blazes at logistical risk. At the end of October, two separate wildfires in Ventura County, California, threatened hundreds of millions of dollars in agricultural produce and the invaluable collections housed within the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Shortly thereafter, fires broke out in southern Australia, suffocating Sydney and other areas with smoke. Over the summer, fires tore through swaths of the Amazon rainforest and Chiquitania Savannah of Brazil and Bolivia, prompting global outcry and concern.

When major fires occur, resources and support from around the world pour into the affected region. The support takes the form of manpower, aerial vehicles, and other equipment. But over time, stretched resources, coupled with the continuation of unsustainable environmental practices such as slash-and-burn agriculture, have made fires harder to fight and resources harder for nations to spare. (*NBC News*, November 1, 2019; *New York Times*, November 21, 2019)

TEMPERATURES RISE AND FISH STOCKS THIN

Rising global sea temperatures are throwing fishing norms into chaos and opening the door for conflict over foodstuff valued the world over. In the waters surrounding Iceland, the numbers of Capelin, a staple fish bought and sold in local markets, have plummeted as herds have moved on to colder waters further to the north. This phenomenon has caused a chain reaction, with more warm-water fish such as mackerel coming in to take their place. The replacement may not seem like a major issue, but it has had two serious consequences. First, the tropical ocean zones now lack replacement fish after native populations have fled toward the poles, and as a result regions off the coast of Africa could soon find their waters devoid of fish. Second, international treaties that parcel out fishing rights in places like Northern Europe are at growing risk of falling apart, as the fishing populations they govern move on to the territorial waters of other nations. (*New York Times*, November 29, 2019)