

2026

GLOBAL HOUSTON MODEL UN CONFERENCE



BACKGROUND GUIDE

**ORGANIZATION OF
AMERICAN STATES**

RARE-EARTH METALS

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OAS

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Introduction to the Organization of American States

The Organization of American States (OAS) was established in 1948 after the signing of its charter in Bogota, Colombia. Today, the OAS has 35 member states working to uphold the pillars of democracy, human rights, security, and development. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) is an autonomous court created by the OAS and plays a key role in enforcing international legal frameworks in the Americas.

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Rare-Earth Metals

Rare earth metals are an increasingly valuable commodity. As nations try to combat climate change and move to a green economy, rare earth metals are an essential part of transitioning to cleaner energy sources. Minerals, like lithium, selenium, and cobalt, are essential to producing clean energy technology, like solar cells and batteries for electric vehicles. As the world shifts towards clean energy technology, global demand for these essential rare earth minerals has accelerated.

Lithium is an essential component for making batteries, making it one of the most in-demand rare earth metals. According to the Harvard International Review, the global market consumption of lithium has "risen by 8.9 percent annually". (2) One of the largest deposits of lithium is in South America. The Lithium Triangle encompasses parts of Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia, and accounts for around 75 percent of the world's lithium supply. (2) The Triangle has particularly large lithium reserves in salt flats. While relatively effective, mining in these extremely dry areas could pose severe long-term consequences for the environment and local communities.

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Lithium Mining Process

Mining lithium is an extremely water-intensive process. In dry places like salt flats, it requires drilling holes into the salt flats and pumping mineral-rich brine to the surface. The brine is then left to evaporate for months at a time, leaving behind salts rich in potassium, manganese, lithium, and borax. In the Lithium Triangle, one of the driest areas on Earth, lithium extraction consumes around “65 percent of the region’s water supply” (2). This is problematic for the impact it has on local communities and their livelihoods. While lithium is essential to creating a cleaner energy system globally, the mining process may not be sustainable for the communities surrounding the operating facilities. The water-intensive mining process exacerbates water scarcity in the region. This is compounded by over-extraction and lack of mining oversight.

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State & Local Impact

State Ownership

As the demand for rare earth minerals has grown, South American nations seem to have shifted towards a nationalized model of resource extraction. While there has been strong rhetoric surrounding the nationalization of resources, lithium operations require heavy infrastructure investments and job training that these countries cannot realistically afford without a foreign partner.

Impact on Local Communities

Lithium operations are advertised for the economic wealth they will bring to local communities, with some politicians saying that they will lift 40% of affected people out of poverty in the mining region. However, the negative consequences of mining production in the Lithium Triangle fall mostly on the local community. Across all three nations, the most lithium-rich mines are positioned on Indigenous land. Frequently, the process of lithium extraction impacts lands with cultural importance to Indigenous communities, but interest from mining companies has enticed governments across the Lithium Triangle to ease restrictions on indigenous land rights to open the mining industry. (3)

Lithium mining also has a direct impact on the freshwater supplies of local communities. Already, locals living near mining facilities in Chile and Argentina have reported toxic waste contamination from lithium mines in their freshwater supply. This supply is used not just for drinking but also for communities' livelihoods, including watering crops and livestock. (5)

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Obstacles and Potential Solutions

Oversight

There is no international decision-making body directly overseeing. Most companies self-regulate with a voluntary private goal, making commitments to have better practices and reducing their impact on local communities. For example, one of the world's largest lithium producers publicly stated a goal to "reduce water use in its lithium mining by 65% by 2040". (5) However, countries not only need to enforce environmental standards, but also create mining-specific regulations for the private sector to follow. How can the OAS promote better dialogue between nations to foster cooperation and the creation of mining-specific environmental regulations?

Commodity Trap

Much of the world's rare earth deposits are located in Africa and South America, making nations like Argentina and Bolivia key players in the transition to clean energy. However, these countries cannot reap the full economic benefits from these deposits, as they provide raw materials, but do not have the infrastructure to process them. Experts note that there are no "major players in manufacturing or trading... battery materials". (1)

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Obstacles and Potential Solutions

Small Scale & Artisanal Mining Operations

Small-scale and artisanal mining is a key source of the global supply of rare earth metals. According to researchers at the University of Michigan, artisanal mining “provides as much as 20% of the global supply” of minerals like cobalt, copper, and lithium. (6) However, it is also notoriously difficult to regulate this sector, and it is rife with environmental concerns and dangerous working conditions. (5) It is much easier to secure promises for safer conditions from large, international mining operations. The elimination of small-scale and artisanal mining is not feasible due to its impact on the global supply chain, as well as its importance to local mining communities. While these operations can be very dangerous, there are often no “comparable alternative livelihood options” for workers in mining communities. (6) Previous attempts to formally regulate small-scale and artisanal mining operations have failed. How does the international community address hazardous working conditions and environmental damage without alienating local mining communities?

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Obstacles and Potential Solutions

Potential Solutions

Potential solutions include the OAS promoting dialogue among its member states to address human rights and environmental issues at mining operations and in the local communities surrounding them. This will only become more important as global demand for rare earth metals grows. Enforcement actions could include building a foundational framework through the IACHR to regulate mining operations. Additionally, the international community needs to find a way to apply these regulations across the mining sector, from international corporations to small-scale and artisanal operations.

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References & Further Reading

1. [UN | Critical Energy Transition Minerals](#)
2. [HIR | The Lithium Triangle](#)
3. [Ohio State University | Global Water Institute](#)
4. [MIT | How is Lithium Mined](#)
5. [World Resource Institute | More Critical Minerals Mining Could Strain Water Supplies in Stressed Regions](#)
6. [University of Michigan | Making the Case for Artisanal & Small-Scale Mining](#)

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Countries in Committee

- | | |
|--------------------|----------------|
| USA | Panama |
| Argentina | Peru |
| Bolivia | Russia |
| Brazil | South Korea |
| Canada | Suriname |
| Chile | Uruguay |
| China | Venezuela |
| Columbia | Paraguay |
| Cuba | Haiti |
| Dominican Republic | Australia |
| Ecuador | France |
| Guyana | Germany |
| Jamica | United Kingdom |
| Japan | UAE |
| Mexico | Saudia Arabia |