**Treasure in Afghanistan**

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Torn by four decades of war and desperate poverty, Afghanistan is believed to be sitting on one of the richest troves of minerals in the world. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), before its failed occupation of Afghanistan, discovered that the country was rich in natural resources. In the 1980s, Soviet mining experts drafted maps and collected data that would lay dormant in the Afghan Geological Survey in Kabul until the rise of the Taliban. These charts documented a vast amount of iron, copper, gold, cobalt, rare earth metals, and lithium.

The United States Geological Survey (USGS) of 2007-2010, through its extensive scientific research of minerals, concluded that Afghanistan may hold 60 million metric tons of copper, 2.2 billion tons of iron ore, 1.4 million tons of rare earth elements (REEs) such as lanthanum, cerium, neodymium, and veins of aluminium, gold, silver, zinc, mercury, and lithium. According to Pentagon officials, their initial analysis at one location in the Ghazni province showed the potential for lithium deposits as large as those of Bolivia, which has the world’s largest known lithium reserves and termed it as “Saudi Arabia of lithium,” referring to the mineral that is an integral component of laptop and smartphone batteries. The USGS estimates the Khanneshin deposits in Helmand province will yield 1.1–1.4 million metric tons of RREs. Some reports estimate Afghanistan’s RRE resources are among the largest on earth.

[UN voices concern about recent hostilities in northwestern Syria](https://nation.com.pk/21-Oct-2021/un-voices-concern-about-recent-hostilities-in-northwestern-syria)

Returning to power in Afghanistan after a 20-year absence, the Taliban have regained control of the natural resources that a former mines minister of the country once said could be worth up to $3 trillion. That estimate was made towards the end of the last commodities’ super cycle in 2010 and could be worth even more now, after a global economic recovery from the coronavirus shock sent prices for everything from copper to lithium soaring this year.

A 2019 report by Afghanistan’s Ministry of Mines and Petroleum put the country’s copper resource at almost 30 million tonnes. An Afghan mining sector roadmap published by the ministry in the same year said there were another 28.5 million tonnes of copper in undiscovered porphyry deposits. That would bring the total close to 60 million tonnes, worth hundreds of billions of dollars at current prices as demand for the metal grows. The said report also said Afghanistan had more than 2.2 billion tonnes of steelmaking raw material iron ore, worth over $350 billion at current market prices. To put that in context, 2.2 billion tonnes of iron ore could be used to construct at least 200,000 replicas of Paris’s Eiffel Tower—the iconic monument which stands at 324m and was constructed from 7,300 tonnes of iron in 1889.

[Fans angry over Pakistan but heap praise for centurion Van der Dussen](https://nation.com.pk/21-Oct-2021/fans-angry-over-pakistan-but-heap-praise-for-centurion-van-der-dussen)

The country is also estimated to have 183 million tonnes of aluminium deposits found mainly in Badakhshan and Kandahar provinces. The lightweight metal is the second most used metal globally, behind only iron. Gold resources were much more modest at an estimated 2,700 kg, worth almost $170 million, while the Afghan ministry also said base metals i.e., tin, lead and zinc were located in multiple areas of the country.

An internal US Department of Defense memo in 2010 reportedly described Afghanistan as the Saudi Arabia of lithium, meaning it could be as crucial for global supply of the battery metal as the Middle Eastern country is for crude oil. The comparison was made at a time lithium was already widely used in batteries for electronics devices but before it had become apparent how much lithium would be needed for electric vehicle (EV) batteries and the world’s low-carbon transition. A 2017/18 report from the US Geological Survey notes that Afghanistan also has deposits of spodumene, a lithium-bearing mineral, but does not provide tonnage estimates, while the 2019 Afghan report makes no mention of lithium at all. The 2019 mines ministry report does, however, say that Afghanistan holds 1.4 million tonnes of rare earth minerals, a group of 17 elements known for their applications in consumer electronics, as well as in military equipment.

[Soldier martyred in terrorist attack at security checkpoint in Balochistan](https://nation.com.pk/21-Oct-2021/soldier-martyred-in-terrorist-attack-at-security-checkpoint-in-balochistan)

With hydrocarbon-rich Iran and Turkmenistan to its west, Afghanistan harbours around 1.6 billion barrels of crude oil, 16 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and another 500 million barrels of natural gas liquids. That’s according to the 2019 Afghan report, which cited a joint US-Afghan assessment, and implies a value of $107 billion for the crude oil alone at current market prices. “Most of the undiscovered crude oil is in the Afghan-Tajik Basin and most of the undiscovered natural gas is in the Amu Darya Basin,” the report stated.

The aforementioned country has historically been a major source of lapis lazuli, a deep blue, semi-precious stone that has been mined in the country’s northern Badakhshan province for thousands of years, as well as other gemstones such as rubies and emeralds. The finest grades of lapis lazuli can fetch up to $150 per carat, according to the 2019 Afghan report, which notes.

[Global rights bodies urge UN chief to help resolve ongoing Myanmar crisis](https://nation.com.pk/21-Oct-2021/global-rights-bodies-urge-un-chief-to-help-resolve-ongoing-myanmar-crisis)

Afghanistan is the eighth most mountainous country in the world, making many parts difficult to access. The Hindu Kush and the Himalayas span the northeast of the landlocked country and contain various minerals and stones including marble, limestone and sandstone which are used widely in construction.

Marble is a versatile rock commonly used in architecture and sculpture. The country yields an impressive 1.3 billion tonnes of the beautiful building stone which is enough marble to build 13,000 Washington Monuments—standing at 169m tall and 17m wide. The Nangarhar province which borders Pakistan is known for its pink onyx marble which is among the most sought-after in the region. Limestone and sandstone are common types of sedimentary rock used widely in construction. Limestone is an essential component of cement and is a major ingredient in household products such as toothpaste and paint. Afghanistan is estimated to have at least 500 million tonnes of limestone found mainly in the provinces of Badakhshan, Herat and Baghlan.

[T20 World Cup: Pakistan loses against South Africa in warm-up match](https://nation.com.pk/20-Oct-2021/t20-world-cup-pakistan-loses-against-south-africa-in-warm-up-match)

China, an Asian giant, is eyeing up not only the investment in Afghanistan’s vast mineral wealth to help rebuild the worn-torn country, now primarily ruled by the Taliban, but is also planning to extend its grand project of BRI to Afghanistan with the help of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) countries. As Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told a media briefing in September 2021, the “Afghan Taliban believes that the BRI is good for development and prosperity in Afghanistan and the broader region.” Beijing is trying to fill the vacuum created after the US forces left Afghanistan economically and get its Belt and Road (BRI) initiatives going. Even gaining access to the lithium deposits plus all the other minerals would help further secure China’s global dominance in critical materials. Already, China has a more than dominant position in REEs, many of which are used in cell phones and defence equipment. Beijing will wait and watch however, before making any big announcements but it might surely be a reality soon.

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The country could descend into chaos even if there is conflict between the various warlords.