

Resource Nationalism and Eco-Imperialism: Conflicting Views on Economic Mining Practices

By Xine Straw

February 2025



THE GLOBAL POLICY HORIZONS LAB

Empowering Evidence-Based Solutions

For a Better World



Webster University
470 E Lockwood Ave, St. Louis, MO 63119, USA



SUMMARY

The governments of the lithium triangle countries have been trying to find a place in the lithium production value chain that reflects their crucial role in it. Either by partial control or total control, the governments of Latin American lithium mining countries have been trying to strike a balance between losing mining revenue and losing mining ventures entirely. The discussion between fighting the threat of eco-imperialism and losing support for mining due to resource nationalism is discussed in this paper.



Headlines

- The eco-imperialism in extractivist countries poses a significant threat to the economies of mining and processing countries in the lithium triangle.
- The resource nationalism of extractivist countries slows and complicates the development of green energy solutions.

Background

Situated within the salares of Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina, the lithium triangle holds about 60% of the world's lithium stores. Lithium is the future of green energy, a “transitional metal” (Lehuedé et. al.) that can fuel electric cars and rechargeable batteries. Though mining practices have created much environmental stress in the triangle as well as harm to the indigenous peoples in the region, they have also introduced economic complications into the world of lithium production (Rizky). To try and combat eco-imperialism, countries controlling the land in the lithium triangle have implemented policies to gain some control over the production and sale of lithium in a process called resource nationalism (ibid).

Eco-imperialism in the Lithium Triangle

Latin American countries have been subject to colonial and imperialist control for over 500 years, since the arrival of conquistadores on the continent. Despite the independence and sovereignty of each Latin American country, many countries have remained under the thumb of imperial entities in the Global North. To battle this continuation of imperialism and improve their position in the value chain, countries such as Chile and Bolivia have attempted to gain more control over lithium production while also bolstering lithium production itself (ibid). Nevertheless, it persists.

Major buyers of lithium, considered “core” countries by many researchers (Lehuedé et. al), benefit from the ‘cheap’ production of lithium happening in the lithium triangle (ibid). Because prices of lithium coming out of the area remain relatively low, major countries have been able to fuel their transition to green energy (Rizky). However, these countries do not bear the destructive environmental externalities, and internationally-funded mining companies like Sociedad Química y Minera (SQM) and Albermarle in Chile have not been offsetting these externalities (Otero et. al).

Environmental destruction, such as sinking salares and loss of flora and fauna (Rentier et. al), affects most heavily the Indigenous populations living on the salares—those who arguably cause the least environmental impact and have the smallest carbon footprints (Lehuedé et. al). Countries in the Global North have been funding mining companies and buying up lithium stock to fuel their ‘greener future’ with little regard for these populations who are now bearing the consequences of both fossil fuel-caused climate change and the exploitation of the ecosystem in their land (Otero et. al). This is considered eco-imperialism (the exploitation of resources and



resource-rich countries by wealthier, further developed countries in the name of environmentalism) in that, to keep resources 'cheap' and create a more 'sustainable' future for the Global North, the externalities of mining and climate change are weighing on the populations of Latin America (Lehuedé et. al), continuing the legacy of colonialism and imperialism in the name of saving the planet.

Resource Nationalism in the Lithium Triangle

To fight the export-oriented fate that lithium triangle countries face as demand for lithium skyrockets, Chile and Bolivia have implemented different involvement strategies to keep control over lithium (Rizky). This is considered resource nationalism by many economic theorists (ibid). In Chile, President Gabriel Boric has tried to keep some control over lithium production while also keeping good relations with buying entities like the EU—thus keeping foreign investment involved in the buying and selling of lithium. However, Boric has also, in what he calls the 'National Lithium Strategy,' "strengthen[ed] the hand of the state in future public-private partnerships in the lithium sector" (ibid). Though Boric has not severed contracts already existing between mining companies in the state, he encouraged state participation before these contracts expire.

These actions do not take total control of the country's lithium production and the major companies that mine it, but they do impose some nationalized control over the landscape of lithium. In Bolivia, on the other hand, government control and resource nationalism have been the norm.

Lithium in Bolivia has not been mined in significant amounts since the 1990s, despite the efforts of the country's government (ibid). Because of the protests of indigenous communities and civil society, Bolivia has not yet found its place in the global lithium market. During Evo Morales' presidency, another attempt to jumpstart lithium production was made, though his nationalized approach and resource nationalist ideologies could not be funded—his method of resource nationalism could not support the infrastructure required for lithium production (ibid). The future of Bolivian lithium, though uncertain, now involves a collaboration between the state-owned lithium company and Chinese battery giant CATL.

This abandonment of resource nationalism by Bolivia and the less rigorous approach to lithium control in Chile suggests that lithium will never be fully in the hands of the lithium triangle countries. Despite this, it seems the lithium triangle countries have staved off being subjected to an export-oriented fate for now.

Conflicting Views: How Will Lithium Help and Hinder Latin American Populations?

Eco-imperialism remains a very real threat. Especially with the lack of research on the impacts of lithium mining practices, it is unclear how much of an effect these practices will have on Latin



American lithium mining countries. Trying to gain complete control over the mining to advance in the value chain of the crucial metal's extraction, processing, and production appears counterintuitive and seemingly impossible, as Bolivia's case suggests.

Without proper regulation upon mining companies to get mining revenue into the countries, eco-imperialism is almost guaranteed to happen. To offset the externalities of lithium mining practices, mining companies should be subjected to some government control and involvement. Governments and populations in the lithium triangle alike should be given a say in lithium production and sale, and the profits from this lucrative business must reach the populations that will most be affected by mining.

However, it seems like resource nationalism is not the way to make sure the lithium triangle countries get the revenue and value chain positioning they desire. With this in mind, the policies created in the future will most likely include foreign investment and involvement, coupled with assistance and support from the governments of lithium triangle countries, to develop a mining practice that fights imperialism without losing investment entirely.



WORKS CITED

Aimar Rizky, Muhammad Erza. "Proceeding of IROFONIC 2024 "Strengthening Partnership for Sustainable Development" Oil of the Future: The Risk of Green Resource Nationalism on Lithium Extracting Countries in Latin America." 3 Jan. 2025.

Dowling, Carmel, and Gerardo Otero. "Mirages or Miracles? Lithium Extraction and the Just Energy Transition." *Energy Research & Social Science*, vol. 119, 26 Nov. 2024, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214629624004535, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2024.103862>. Accessed 13 Jan. 2025.

Sebastián Lehuedé, and Ana Valdivia. *Peripheries on the Rise: Eco-Imperialism in the Race for Technology Resourcing*. 1 Jan. 2025, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5085112>. Accessed 27 Jan. 2025.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Xine Straw is an International Relations and Languages and Transcultural Studies in Spanish double major at Webster University. She is focusing on the effects of corporatism in Latin America in the past and how, if left unchecked, it will affect the region in the present and future.





ABOUT THE GLOBAL POLICY HORIZONS RESEARCH LAB

Webster University's Global Policy Horizons Lab is a policy-focused research entity where students, Lab researchers, affiliated faculty, as well as members of the policy community from across disciplines, can explore national and global security issues, generate original research, as well as produce peer-reviewed policy papers and commentaries. The Lab pursues innovative research focusing on unconventional threats, identity and security, the role of technology in security, economic security, as well environmental and food security. The goal of the Lab is to become a knowledge hub that informs national governments and other members of the global policy community on contemporary and future security challenges.

The current Director of the Lab is Professor Dani Belo, PhD.

