TALKING TRADE:
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UK URGED TO ACT ON CRITICAL MINERALS AS GLOBAL TRADE PRESSURES MOUNT

Gun Trade Insider editor Rob Smith and the GTA's chief executive, Stephen Jolly, discuss how global pressures on critical mineral supply chains are affecting the UK shooting industry.

The UK's growing dependence on imported critical minerals, many of which are essential for the manufacture of firearms and ammunition components, is coming under renewed scrutiny. A government-commissioned report, alongside recent policy developments in the United States, has pushed the issue higher up the agenda, with potential implications for the shooting industry, and in particular the defence sector.

In April, the Department for Business and Trade published the UK Critical Minerals Recycling and Midstream Processing Capability Assessment, which identifies significant vulnerabilities in the country's mineral supply chains. The report highlights the UK's limited domestic capacity to mine or refine key materials such as tungsten, bismuth and magnesium – which are relevant to ammunition production and specialist firearms components.

This is not a challenge unique to the UK. In the United States, the Bureau of Industry and Security has launched an investigation into the national security risks associated with critical mineral dependence. The National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) is currently gathering input from manufacturers and importers on how potential tariffs or trade restrictions might affect the wider shooting industry, with particular concern around costs and supply chain stability.

For the UK, this growing global focus on mineral resilience underscores its own exposure. The government report recommends several policy interventions to improve domestic capability, including matched funding for recycling innovation, extended energy relief for processors, and clearer rules on waste classification. However, with implementation still in its early stages, industry observers are urging faster action to ensure long-term production stability.

China remains the dominant global player in the refining and export of many critical minerals. The UK, like many other countries, is reliant on Chinese supply either directly or through intermediaries. This creates both economic and political risk, particularly in the context of shifting global alliances and the potential for future trade restrictions.

For most retail-focused firearms businesses in the UK, the short-term impact of mineral price fluctuations is minimal. Fewer than 300 new sporting guns are made in the UK each year, and the cost of raw materials typically accounts for less than 15 per cent of the final product value. As such, mineral prices are not currently a major concern for the average GTA member.

However, ammunition manufacturers and defence-sector suppliers face a more complex landscape. Companies such as Hull Cartridge, Gamebore and Eley Hawk are already seeing steep increases in input costs, which are likely to feed through to retail pricing later this year. This comes at a time when RFDs are under pressure from rising operational costs, additional compliance burdens, and cautious consumer spending.

A significant number of the GTA's larger members are involved, directly or indirectly, in the defence supply chain. For these companies, any disruption to mineral supplies – or rapid price escalation – could have a more immediate operational and commercial impact. Exporters are also vulnerable to further volatility stemming from currency fluctuations, freight delays and geopolitical tension.

For policymakers, the priority must now be to improve the UK's strategic resilience. This includes investment in domestic processing and recycling infrastructure, as well as securing stable trade relationships with countries that have reliable reserves of critical minerals. Potential partners include Vietnam, Bolivia, Rwanda, Australia, Austria, Spain and Portugal. The UK's post-Brexit position may offer some flexibility here, provided there is the political appetite to act.

That said, many in the shooting industry view mineral supply as a secondary concern. A more immediate and pressing issue is the increasingly restrictive licensing environment, which some perceive as a coordinated attempt to marginalise lawful firearms ownership and trade.

At the time of going to print, 22 May, the GTA understands that prices for many critical minerals have eased from their recent highs. However, the market remains volatile, and any disruption to global supply chains could quickly reverse this trend.

While material costs may not currently pose a significant threat to most dealers, the fragility of supply chains – and the broader policy response to it – deserves close attention. The government must ensure that future trade and industrial strategies reflect the needs of both civilian and defence-linked businesses within the UK's shooting sector. ■

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