El Triángulo del Litio y la Competencia Estratégica por los Minerales Críticos

20 APR 2026 · MEMBER LIBRARY

Map of actors, operations and vectors of influence in Chile, Argentina and Bolivia

Executive summary

The Litio Triangle has been consolidated as one of the main scenarios of geoeconomic competition between China and the United States in the Western Hemisphere. However, analyzing this struggle only in abstract terms of "influence" or "alignment" is insufficient. The true correlation of forces is observed in the effective control of concrete projects, shareholdings, supply contracts, industrial financing, associated processing and ability to condition the regulatory evolution of producing countries.

China has achieved a dominant position not only because it invests more, but because it has ensured an early presence in the main strategic assets of the Triangle through a combination of direct acquisitions, preferential financing, vertical integration and alliances with state and subnational actors. The challenge for the West is not merely diplomatic: it consists of displacing, diluting or containing an architecture of influence already partially consolidated on the ground.

Chile: closed market, high concentration and dispute over new generation assets

Chile continues to be the most valuable institutional asset of the Litio Triangle, but also one of the most closed and concentrated markets. The core of national production continues to revolve around the Salar de Atacama, controlled mainly by two actors: SQL and Albemarle.

The most significant recent development has been the reconfiguration of the sector around the agreement between Codelco and SQM, whereby the Chilean State has ensured a majority share of 51 per cent in the future joint exploitation of the Atacama Salar until 2060. This operation not only partially recentralizes State control over the main Chilean litifer asset, but also limits the margin of entry of new international actors except through association with State-sponsored structures.

This agreement indirectly affects Tianqi Lithium, relevant shareholder of SQM and main vector of indirect Chinese presence in the Chilean sector. Although Tianqi tried to challenge the operation, the design of the alliance de facto reduces its ability to influence the strategic governance of the asset.

The main entry opportunity for Western actors in Chile is taking place in the next generation of assets still in development, especially in the Salar de Maricunga, where Rio Tinto has agreed to invest up to $900 million to acquire a share of 49.99% in the project led by Codelco. This operation makes Rio Tinto the main emerging Western counterweight in the Chilean sector and marks one of the most important strategic movements of recent years in the country.

However, the Chilean structural problem remains regulatory. The combination of state control, environmental complexity, administrative judicialization and bureaucratic slowness greatly limits the speed with which new actors can reposition themselves.

Operational conclusion: Chile offers institutional quality and top-level assets, but real market access is increasingly mediated by the State. The displacement of Chinese influence will not come by competitive liberalization, but by selective state alliances with Western actors.

Argentina: main Chinese expansion front and last big western window

Argentina is today the main operational battlefield of the Litio Triangle. Its federal structure, the autonomy of the mining provinces and a relatively favorable framework for private investment have generated the most open environment for competition between Chinese and Western capital.

The key provinces are Catamarca, Salta and Jujuy, with increasing importance also of La Rioja. Overall, Argentina already has approximately seven active operations and about forty projects in different phases of development.

China has ensured a dominant presence in multiple assets through direct holdings, committed supply agreements and industrial financing:

Ganfeng Lithium is one of the most relevant Chinese actors in the country. It controls or participates in several strategic assets, including significant positions in brine projects and joint structures with local and international operators.

Zijin Mining has also increased its presence, consolidating itself as one of the main Chinese penetration vehicles in Argentine mining.

The most important Western response has come from Rio Tinto, whose acquisition of Arcadium Lithium and subsequent securing of approximately $1.18 billion of funding for the project Rincon in Salta represents the largest recent Western movement in the country. The stated goal is to achieve an annual production close to 60,000 tons of lithium carbonate battery grade.

This movement places Rio Tinto as the main structural Western competitor against Ganfeng and other Chinese actors in Argentina.

However, Buenos Aires has made it clear that growing cooperation with Washington on critical minerals does not imply exclusion of Chinese capital. Argentina seeks to maximize competition among bidders, not to align itself exclusively with a block.

Operational conclusion:Argentina is the only theatre where a substantial rebalancing of the correlation of forces is still possible, but the window narrows rapidly as the share and contractual structures of the projects currently under development are consolidated.

Bolivia: strategic reserve partially captured by revisionist actors

Bolivia hosts some of the world's largest lithium geological resources, particularly in the Salar de Uyuni, but remains the least developed and most politically complex component of the Triangle.

The Bolivian government has signed agreements of great relevance with the Chinese consortium CBC, linked to CATL, as well as with the Russian Uranium One, for the development of direct extraction and industrial processing plants. One of the agreements with the Chinese consortium includes investment commitments close to $1 billion.

However, these projects continue to face significant obstacles:

Legislative approval remains uncertain.

The territorial and communal conflict is high.

Bolivian political instability introduces a high risk of reversion or contractual renegotiation.

Unlike Argentina, Bolivia is not today an open competition market, but rather a long-term strategic positioning space where China and Russia agree to operate under levels of uncertainty that most Western actors consider prohibitive.

Operational conclusion: Bolivia is strategically relevant for reserves, but today it is not the main field of Western maneuver. Rather than displacing Chinese actors, the plausible objective would be to prevent full consolidation and take advantage of future windows of political opening.

Real mechanisms of Chinese influence and pressure

China's competitive superiority is not limited to the mere availability of capital.

First, China offers comprehensive packages of finance, engineering, equipment and infrastructure, which greatly reduces coordination costs for local governments and operators.

Secondly, their companies show a significantly greater willingness to operate in weak governance environments. The case of a Chinese operator in Catamarca was specifically mentioned that it would have assumed regulatory or environmental sanctions as a simple business cost without substantially altering its operation.

Thirdly, Chinese actors can offer much longer time horizons, as they are less conditioned by pressures of immediate profitability.

Finally, their lower exposure to reputational or regulatory compliance restrictions gives them comparative advantage in opaque markets.

How the displacement of Chinese actors could occur

The displacement of Chinese influence will not occur through abrupt expulsions or widespread prohibitions. Realistic scenarios are gradual containment and competitive dilution.

In Chile, the main mechanism will be the partial substitution of indirect Chinese influence through increasing state control and preferential association with Western actors, as exemplified by the Codelco-Rio Tinto case in Maricunga.

In Argentina, the displacement will depend on who captures the next wave of projects not yet fully awarded or funded. Here the western execution speed will be determining.

In Bolivia, the most realistic goal is not to displace China in the short term, but to prevent it from irreversibly consolidating its position before any future opening.

Final rating

The Litio Triangle is not simply a region rich in natural resources: it is one of the main scenarios where the future architecture of global strategic supply chains is being decided.

China has succeeded in securing relevant positions on virtually all key fronts, especially in Argentina and Bolivia, while maintaining significant indirect influence in Chile.

The West retains real repositioning options, but no longer part of a neutral situation. It must compete from a backward position.

The next phase of the dispute will not be decided in diplomatic conferences or in declarations on "friend-shoring", but on who finances, constructs, operates and controls the next large lithium projects that enter into production in the Southern Cone.

In this area, the decisive question is not whether Hispanic America wants to diversify its alliances. The question is whether the West is willing to compete with the seriousness, speed and scale needed to make it possible.