OPINION

Mining the Arctic's critical minerals is vital for Canada's sovereignty, Northern prosperity

SEAN BOYD
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL
PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

Sean Boyd is executive chair of the board of Agnico Eagle Mines Ltd.



Agnico-Eagle's Meadowbank mine in Nunavut, on June 28, 2011.
EUAN ROCHA/REUTERS

Canada launched a new Arctic and Northern Policy Framework in 2019, supported by $700-million in dedicated funding. It correctly calls on all of Canada to strengthen our sovereignty, while building the kind of economic future northerners want, and doing it in a way that protects the environment. This was a positive first step.

But it is missing a component: the development of the Arctic's abundant mineral resources, including critical minerals crucial for the decarbonized economy of the future. That must be an essential element of any Arctic strategy.

Arctic peoples have long understood this. In fact, when Nunavut was carved out of the Northwest Territories 24 years ago, the Inuit deliberately selected land with the most mineral potential, because they understood the value those resources would have in the future. That future is now.

Advancing the development of a mining industry in the North is clearly in Canada's national interest. Doing so could make the region a leading supplier of minerals required for the global energy transition, while also creating economic opportunity and prosperity for Indigenous peoples. It would also solidify Canada's claim to sovereignty through an increased business presence.

Over the past 15 years, Agnico Eagle has invested more than $9-billion in its operations in Nunavut, and at a more general level, mining activities contribute approximately 40 per cent of the territory's GDP. The federal government, the territorial government, industry and regional Inuit associations must work together on ways to continue building on the positive benefits that mining has brought to the territory.

As we listen to the aspirations and needs of our Inuit partners, three key priorities emerge: infrastructure, training and energy.

The lack of infrastructure, including roads, ports and modern telecommunications as well as housing, holds the region back from realizing its broader goals. According to the Mining Association of Canada, the Arctic is one of the most expensive jurisdictions for mineral development in the world, primarily because of the infrastructure gap.

Better infrastructure and connectivity will not only facilitate the development of mineral resources and other projects, but they will also increase labour mobility and improve access to essential services, including health care and education across the North. We shouldn't see infrastructure as a cost, but rather an investment that will pay long-term dividends if we have the courage to act now.

Secondly, Nunavut has one of the youngest demographics in Canada and thousands of people are forecast to enter the work force over the coming years. However, many young people are not able to take full advantage of management and technical job opportunities in mining because they are unable to access the necessary education and training.

Over the long term, our sincere hope is that all of our mining operations in Nunavut will be managed and run by Nunavummiut. To make this a reality, more investment in education and training is urgently required. In addition, we must ensure that there is sufficient flexibility in these programs to provide training that matches opportunities with available workers.

While the federal government spends significant resources on training, too often these programs lack the flexibility in their design and implementation to meet the unique challenges of the North.

Finally, all 25 communities in Nunavut are powered by diesel, with electricity production consuming 55 million litres of diesel each year. The reliance on diesel-fuelled electricity results in significant greenhouse-gas emissions and is a barrier to scaling up power generation to meet the needs of a mining industry. It is also expensive, making for a significant drag not just on quality of life but also business development.

Creating a clean national electricity grid should be a priority for the government, and in an ESG world, access to clean energy is a source of competitive advantage in attracting mining investments. Initiatives such as the Kivalliq Hydro-Fibre Link, which seeks to bring clean, renewable hydroelectricity from Manitoba to the Kivalliq region of Nunavut, are urgently needed.

Sovereignty is made real by permanent, connected residents and commercial activity within a territory. An Arctic and Northern Strategy that builds up the people and economy of the North by supporting the development of mineral resources across the Arctic is by far the best opportunity we have to secure our borders and create a thriving Northern economy.