



# Ambassador's Activities

2012

Distributor: French Embassy in the UK  
- Press and Communications Services -  
58 Knightsbridge, SW1X 7JT London  
E-Mail: [press@ambafrance-uk.org](mailto:press@ambafrance-uk.org)  
Web: [www.ambafrance-uk.org](http://www.ambafrance-uk.org)

---

Speech by HE Bernard Emié,  
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at the Franco-British bilateral workshop  
on strategic metals

London, 11 June 2012

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you today to the Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining for this two-day bilateral workshop to discuss the most topical issue of strategic metals.

I am delighted to see that collaborative efforts between the Science and Technology Department of the Embassy, the Technology Strategy Board and the Chemistry Innovation, Environmental Sustainability and Materials Knowledge Transfer Networks have produced such an impressive programme and secured the participation of many eminent specialists from the European Commission, the French and British governments, industry and academia to discuss this topic in its scientific, economical and geopolitical dimensions.

In September 2010, a Chinese fishing boat colliding with two Japanese coastguard vessels in waters controlled by Japan but long claimed by China resulted in a cascade of events bringing us all here today. Following the incident and the detention of the fishing trawler captain, the Chinese government blocked exports to Japan of a crucial category of minerals, the so-called rare earths. Widely used in products like hybrid cars, wind turbines and guided missiles, but also in everyday products like computers and smart phones, rare earths have somehow become an integral part of our modern lives. Therefore, the fear that China might expand this embargo to the West triggered panic and, above all, a realization that China actually currently controls 95% of worldwide supply and demand in those elements. As Deng Xiaoping once said, “whereas the Middle East has oil, China dominates rare earths”.

While so-called rare earths are not actually rare, they are nevertheless distributed all over the world in a non-uniform fashion. Moreover, the cost of separating rare earths from the ore and their association with radioactive deposits have led most extraction facilities in the West to close down, to the benefit of China, who, over the years, has positioned herself as a reliable supplier, slowly acquiring a monopoly. Apart from rare earths, a number of other elements are integral to the national defence, aerospace and energy industries and subject to potential supply restrictions: they are the “strategic metals” – tungsten, magnesium and lithium, to name just a few. While rare earths are considered to be strategic metals, not all strategic metals are rare earths.

The fact is, the vast majority of European countries are currently dependent on the rest of the world for their strategic metals supply. With the steep increase in worldwide demand – whether to meet the needs of our consumer societies, the target of a low-carbon economy or the development of state-of-the-art technologies – the supply in strategic metals is bound to decrease, prices are bound to soar and natural resource conflicts could potentially occur.

Conflicts of interest are an inevitable feature of all societies. But to avoid disputes over access to and the control and use of natural resources – often arising when needs are incompatible or when some user groups’ priorities are not taken into consideration – it is crucial to work collaboratively and reflect jointly on best practice, alternative solutions and the practicalities of recycling, recovery and efficient design.

Many events have been held on this subject over the past year and a half, nationally, bilaterally or internationally. Parliamentary inquiries have been conducted, in France as well as in the UK, and both our countries have taken initiatives, be they the creation of the French Committee for Strategic Metals (COMES) in 2011 or the drafting of the UK Resource Security Action Plan. Last December, our colleagues from the British Embassy in Berlin’s science and innovation network organized a German-British event entitled “Materials that don’t cost the Earth”, and at the end of May an Australian delegation visited the UK, Germany and France to discuss investment and potential future cooperation. It is therefore extremely timely that we now have a Franco-British event during which we will be discussing:

the strengths and weaknesses of both our countries, opportunities for them and threats facing them;

their vulnerability to a potential decline or restriction in the supply of strategic metals;

the availability of those materials to the industry;

the roles of the governments to ensure supplies are produced ethically;

and the opportunities for international cooperation.

I recently came across an idea developed by Planetary Resources, a company based in Seattle, to mine asteroids for their strategic metals content. The way I understand it, the idea would be to send robot spacecraft to identify promising asteroids made of metal, which would then be lassoed and very slowly brought into moon orbit for automated mining. While we do indeed live in a fast-paced world, I sincerely hope that – before having to go to these lengths – we can still rely on human interaction, common sense, best practice, expertise and, above all, opportunities like today's to stimulate dialogue, identify viable solutions and nurture future cooperation between our countries.

Over the years, France and the United Kingdom have successfully cooperated in many areas, especially defence and security. A new area, nuclear power and more broadly energy cooperation, is also emerging very strongly. The intrinsic aim of this embassy's science and technology department is to stimulate and promote the reciprocal benefits of collaborative research in science and technology. Thanks to the organization of workshops like the one you are attending today, or via more targeted actions, this has been successfully accomplished in the fields of nanotechnology (in 2011) and biodiversity/seed conservations (in 2012), projects in which our team has played a key catalytic role, leading participants to secure funding for their research from the European Commission. I sincerely hope this event will help you identify new potential collaborative projects, be they in the area of science, technology and industry or more widely at political level, and establish yet more links between our countries. I wish you all the best for these two days and a very successful event.