Melissa Sanderson on Cyberwarfare and Why America Still Needs China

written by Tracy Hughes | November 22, 2026

Melissa Sanderson believes the United States is underestimating the cyber threats to its critical infrastructure, even as it tries to reduce its dependence on China for critical minerals. In an InvestorNews interview with Tracy Hughes, the Co-Chair of the Critical Minerals Institute (CMI) argued that securing supplies requires stronger preparedness at home and diplomacy that gives new mines and processing plants time to be built.

Her perspective draws on 21 years in the U.S. Foreign Service, including arms-control work in Moscow, followed by senior roles at Freeport-McMoRan Inc. (NYSE: FCX). A Professor of Practice at Arizona State University's Thunderbird School of Global Management, Melissa Sanderson has worked across the diplomatic and industrial sides of resource security.

Asked about the recent succession of transportation and financial disruptions, Melissa Sanderson argued that the pattern pointed to coordinated probing of critical systems. Her concern is that intruders can identify weaknesses, establish access and remain inside a network for future attacks. "Once you're inside the fence, you can get a lot done in a short time," she said.

That assessment differs from the public findings released so far. The FAA said it had no indication of a cyberattack behind the November 13 ground stop and confirmed that some communications and radar systems continued operating. In a November 18 statement, the administration said it had found no evidence linking the recent FAA, Microsoft and banking outages

to one another or to a hostile actor.

The broader threat she describes is documented. In a February 2024 advisory, U.S. security agencies warned that the China-sponsored group Volt Typhoon had gained persistent access to critical infrastructure networks, positioning itself to cause disruption during a crisis or conflict. The advisory covered communications, energy, transportation and water systems.

Preparedness also framed the interview's discussion of stockpiling. Britain's Security Minister Dan Jarvis had urged households to hold three days of bottled water and non-perishable food in his October 22 parliamentary statement. The conversation then moved to industrial reserves, where Melissa Sanderson questioned whether stored minerals would be available in the forms manufacturers need. "You're going to stockpile what precisely?" she asked.

The United States' Project Vault is structured as an independently governed partnership between manufacturers and private capital providers, with up to US$10 billion in financing approved by the Export-Import Bank of the United States. Its stated purpose is to protect manufacturers against supply shocks. Melissa Sanderson's concern was the processing that may still be required before stored material can be put to work, particularly when different customers require different products.

On U.S. politics, Melissa Sanderson expects the commitment to critical minerals to survive the Democrats' election victories in the House and Senate. She sees different political motivations supporting the same industrial objective, with Democrats emphasizing economic transformation and clean energy and Republicans emphasizing defense and national security. "The bipartisan support is unlikely to falter," she said.

She pointed to the Biden administration's Inflation Reduction Act and the Minerals Security Partnership, launched in 2022, as part of that continuity. Under President Donald Trump, support has also taken the form of equity investment and price protection. MP Materials Corp. (NYSE: MP) announced its Pentagon agreement in July 2025, including a government equity investment and a ten-year US$110-per-kilogram price floor for neodymium-praseodymium products.

Her confidence in policy continuity did not translate into a forecast of an immediate market recovery. Asked about weakness in critical minerals equities, Melissa Sanderson said the reasons for the selling were unclear and that she did not expect a near-term rebound. She did not regard the election result as a threat to the sector's long-term development.

The interview also touched on the national-security questions surrounding NVIDIA Corporation (NASDAQ: NVDA). Its board announced an independent investigation on November 8 into reports that founder and then-CEO Jensen Huang had been targeted by a foreign intelligence effort. The board said at the time it had no reason to believe company secrets or national security had been compromised. NVIDIA subsequently announced his resignation and Colette Kress's appointment as interim CEO. Melissa Sanderson emphasized the uncertainty surrounding the case. "In the espionage world, sometimes several things are real at the same time," she said.

Her argument for diplomacy with China rested on the time needed to build competing mineral supply chains. President Donald Trump and President Xi Jinping met in Shenzhen on November 19. Melissa Sanderson supported the effort to repair relations, saying continued confrontation risked making an already difficult supply situation worse. "We were never going to be minerals independent in four years or less," she said.

“It literally takes time to build mines, processing facilities, metal makers, magnet makers, and to put an infrastructure chain together that supports those industrial activities,” Melissa Sanderson said. She also identified the electricity grid as work requiring sustained investment over decades. In her assessment, President Donald Trump is “trying to mend bridges with China to buy the U.S. time, the time that we need to get the job done.”