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GABRIEL EYSELEIN, THERESA HERDLITSCHKA

Towards geopolitical societal relationships with nature? The case of the EU's critical raw material policies

ABSTRACT With the global order in flux and geopolitical tensions rising, geopolitical thinking increasingly shapes EU policies. Focusing on critical raw materials (CRMs) and related policies, we argue that these developments signal and structure the emergence of a form of geopolitical societal relationships with nature with nature. Based on a qualitative analysis of public policy documents, we demonstrate the geopolitical shift in the symbolic-discursive and material-physical dimensions of CRMs. Adopting a relational perspective, we depart from conventional neorealist accounts to offer an alternative interpretation of the current conjuncture, highlighting the contradictions that characterise it.

KEYWORDS critical raw materials, geopolitics, societal relationships with nature, EU raw material policy, technology

1. Introduction

In her State of the Union Address 2025, EU Commission (EC) President von der Leyen noted that “Europe must fight for its place in a world in which many major powers are either ambivalent or openly hostile to Europe. (...) A world in which dependencies are ruthlessly weaponised” (EC 2025c). At the centre of concerns about weaponised interdependence are critical raw materials (CRMs), especially metals and minerals such as lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements (REE). As prerequisites for a range of technologies, from AI and high-tech weapons to renewable energies and medical applications, these raw materials have become the focus of

geopolitical and geoeconomic competition. Embedded in a race for technological leadership and depending on their position in the supply chain, they are used either as a geopolitical tool to strong-arm others or treated as objects of strategic desire. The latter applies to the EU in a situation where most of its supply chains in strategic sectors – including renewable energy, electromobility, energy-intensive industry, digital technology, aerospace and defence – are deemed vulnerable, given their dependence on raw materials (Carrara et al. 2023). The supply of CRMs is characterised by a highly concentrated, oligopolistic structure: 83 % of the world's germanium is extracted in China, 63 % of cobalt in the DRC, and 95 % of the world's lithium is sourced from just five countries (SCRREEN 2023). The situation at the processing stage is even more drastic, as China accounts for up 98 % of gallium, 92 % of REE, 77 % of cobalt and 70 % of lithium processing (IEA 2025). The EU is therefore heavily dependent on imports. In light of the geopolitical crisis, the long-term strategic dimension of securing CRMs has become an increasingly pivotal feature of EU policy, gradually pulling the debate away from its former anchors, such as the energy transition, and reorienting it around geopolitical and geoeconomic imperatives and security concerns (Herranz-Surrallés 2024; Leonelli 2025).

Against the backdrop of this geopolitical and geoeconomic shift, we argue that these developments signal – and serve as an expression of – a deeper reconfiguration in the underlying societal-nature relations: we propose that this can be seen as an emerging form of a geopolitical societal relationships with nature.

This article, therefore, follows a twofold aim. Firstly, using the EU's raw material policy as an example, we want to empirically shed light on this shift by focussing on the core principles of the concept of societal relationships with nature (SRN): namely the material-physical and the symbolic-discursive dimensions. This perspective allows us to explore how, at the symbolic-discursive level, CRMs are framed through strategic and geopolitical logics, shaping public understanding and policy discourse on resource security. At the material level, we examine how policies designed to secure CRMs actively reshape geographical relationships and global value chains, creating tangible shifts in economic and territorial arrangements. Proposing that this shift signals the emergence of geopolitical

SRN, we offer a conceptual framework for the current conjuncture – one that contributes to the growing literature on geopolitical ecology (Bigger/Neimark 2017; Graddy-Lovelace/Ranganathan 2024; Post/Le Billon 2024) – by adding a perspective which focuses on the underlying societal-nature relations of such developments.

Secondly, at a more conceptual level, by operationalising the concept of SRN, we offer an alternative, relational reading of the geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts in raw material policy. In doing so, we depart from neo-realist approaches that view geographies, space, state territories, and resources as asocial and apolitical entities. Such perspectives reflect a geo-deterministic view in which, as Kuzemko et al. (2024: 4) describe it, “these geographical factors are taken as given, creating one-way causality where a reified geography conditions international politics, but not the other way round”. These types of analysis often start with the threat of scarcity, coupled with neo-Malthusian arguments, perceiving the control of ‘scarce’ raw materials automatically as a form of power capacity within an anarchic international system (Hofmann 2018; Le Billon 2004). This however, obscures the role of socio-political factors (Blondeel et al. 2021; Klinger 2018), driven by capital and states, in shaping how raw materials are understood and how resource frontiers emerge. Focusing on the SRNs’ material-physical and symbolic-discursive dimension, we apply a relational approach, attempting to balance and transcend the ontological basis of nature or raw materials as “either purely a Cartesian-material or ideational category” (Hofmann 2018: 99) and thus to challenge geo-deterministic views. In this sense we follow Riofrancos’ (2023) argument that “geology is not destiny”.

Empirically, our analysis is based on publicly available policy documents, with interviews used for contextualisation. The article is structured as follows: first, we introduce SRN as our theoretical cornerstone (2.) and outline our research methodology (3.). In the next step, we present an overview of key phases in the EU’s raw material policies from 2000-2025 to illustrate the shift (4.). We then focus on the current conjuncture, considering the material-physical and the symbolic-discursive dimension of SRN (5.), to then further contextualise and discuss our findings in broader debates regarding the discontinuity and continuity of global power relations (6.). In a last step, we offer a brief outlook (7.).

2. Societal relationships with nature

As a framework concept (Becker et al. 2011), SRN offers a critical macro perspective on how nature is societally produced while being mediated through biophysical conditions. With this, the concept is trying to overcome the frequently presented dualism of society and nature (Görg 2011: 44). The concept of SRN builds on four core principles: first, society and nature are in a complex relationship, dialectically interconnected, yet distinct, meaning that “nature indeed exists as material-substantial environment but is always already shaped by society and is managed and symbolised in spatial-temporally different forms” (Brand/Wissen 2013: 690). Nature is not external to society; rather, it is shaped and produced by societal factors and effects while always reasserting some degree of autonomy (Brand et al. 2024). Second, the relationship of these two (society and nature) is organised through material-physical and symbolic-discursive practices (Becker et al. 2011). This separation is merely analytical, as the two dimensions are always mutually shaping each other (see figure 1).

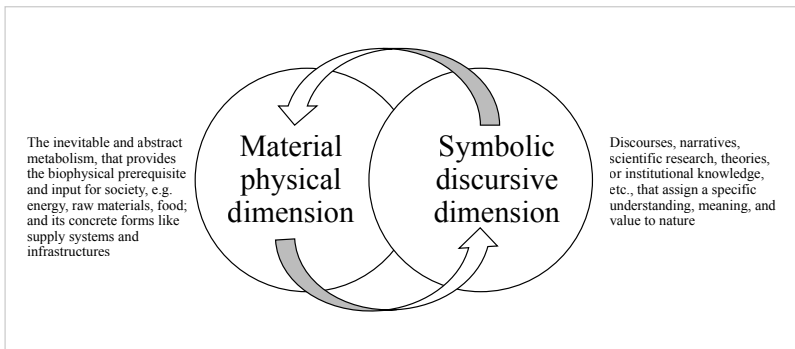


Figure 1: Dual character of societal relationships with nature, building on Becker et al. 2011

The material-physical dimension refers to both the abstract metabolism and the concrete forms through which societies organise their biophysical prerequisites. This includes the infrastructures and built environments that enable energy, food, and raw material supply systems. In this process, nature is constantly appropriated and transformed by work (Brand/Görg

2022). The nature-society relationship extends beyond areas where the metabolism is most visible, such as extraction sites; it is also discursively constituted through contested perceptions, values, interpretations, and definitions. The symbolic-discursive dimension of SRN illuminates how society constructs and interprets nature, establishing dominant views that shape perception and use, materialising these in knowledge production, everyday practices, and modes of production and living. Ascription of value is therefore not inherent in nature itself but emerges through social processes that link material-physical characteristics with culturally and historically specific meanings and modes of production (Brand/Görg 2022; Hultman et al. 2021). Third, what counts as ‘natural’ or ‘societal’ depends on the spatial-temporal context and on specific “power and gender relations, institutional arrangements, political-economic regimes” (Hummel et al. 2017: 5). Multiple forms of SRN exist, and certain dominant formations, such as the capitalist one, can be generalised across specific historical periods, but are never absolute (Graf 2022). The capitalist SRN operates through an instrumental treatment of nature, characterised by the continuous valorisation, commodification, and appropriation of natural resources to fuel capitalist accumulation. While capitalism depends on its material basis and natural conditions, it systematically abstracts from these dependencies, progressively undermining the very foundations on which it relies, ultimately endangering its own reproduction (Brand/Wissen 2013). Fourth, to make these contradictions processable, societies must regulate their relationships with nature (Brand/Wissen 2011). The concept of SRN reflects this premise, viewing societies embedded in the contingent and contested search for a more or less stable regulation of their relationships. These relationships are mediated and stabilised “via institutions, norms, values, subjectivation processes and normalised practices that make the structural contradictions processable over a certain period of time.” (Brand/Wissen 2011: 18; own translation).

Referring to regulation theory, we focus on the regulatory aspect (*Regulierung*) vis-à-vis the aspect of regulation: while the latter encompasses the more complex, non-intentionally produced forms, our emphasis is on the control exercised by the state and its institutions (Brand 2003: 305). In line with Schneider’s (2022) argument, this allows us to conceptualise policies and state actions as a calibration process of structural forms

(such as SRN) and as a facet of a broader ‘discovery process’ for a functional mode of regulation to counter crisis tendencies. This means that, on the one hand, policies shape SRN, while on the other hand, policies are structured and mirror a specific formation of SRN. They simultaneously serve as vehicles for stabilising and establishing power relations (Wissen 2018). Drawing on these insights, alongside the extensive literature on resource-making in the field of political geography (Kama 2020; Valdivia et al. 2021), we conceptualise raw materials as “part physical entity, part social category” (Bridge 2009: 1219), and as an emblematic example of “socio-nature” (Swyngedouw 1999). Raw materials thus reflect nature-society relations; raw material policies can be read as regulatory attempts to structure the SRN and, in doing so, articulating a particular formation of it.

We argue that recent developments in the EU’s raw materials policies, as outlined in chapter 4, indicate a shift in societal relationships with nature. This shift is visible in the core principles of the concept of SRN outlined above, namely the material-physical and symbolic-discursive dimensions. While the EU’s raw material policy serves as a compelling example, we recognise that this political expression only represents a fraction of a wide array of social practices constituting a specific form of SRN.

3. Methodology

We base our argument on an in-depth analysis of policy documents, selected from official EU sources. These documents include speeches and statements by EU representatives, as well as communications, directives and press-releases from 2000 onwards, a period that marks the emergence of the first EU Raw Materials Initiative and the broader debates it set in motion. The documents were qualitatively coded with an inductive-deductive coding scheme. To substantiate and deepen the insights gained from the document analysis, we triangulated our findings with multiple formal and informal interviews conducted by the authors during the EU Raw Materials Week in 2024 and 2025. This multi-method design not only enabled us to validate interpretations and capture nuanced shifts and

emerging perspectives, but also provided a comprehensive understanding of EU raw material policies over the past 25 years. However, the primary focus of our analysis lies on recent policy developments.

To operationalise SRN's symbolic-discursive dimension, we focus on narratives. We understand narratives as a subset of overarching discourses. These narratives function as a form of meaning-making by defining problems, solutions, and relevant stakeholders and by connecting events, actions, and actors into coherent plots (Hajer 1997). Multiple narratives coexist around a single topic and compete for discursive dominance (Leipold 2021); we, however, will focus solely on the dominant policy narratives in our analysis and examine the EU's official narratives.

For the material-physical dimension, we focus on economic and territorial configurations. We concentrate on regulatory instruments, investment incentives, and sourcing strategies, considering the ways these might reallocate extraction and processing activities, alter trade routes and dependencies, and reconfigure the distribution of socio-ecological effects across regions. We understand these practices as part of the material dimension, as they ultimately create new political-economic structures, built environments, infrastructure and a restructuring of material flows (Dorn et al. 2022).

4. Key phases in the EU's raw materials policy

In this chapter, we trace the evolution of EU raw material policies since the early 2000s. Drawing on policy documents, interviews, and scientific literature, we provide a brief review of how perceptions, practices, and politics have shifted from an initial focus on free-market thinking and economic concerns, to a focus on green growth logic and climate concerns, and more recently towards a strategic and geopolitical logic.

4.1 Emerging technologies – emerging debates

Despite the EU's origins in the European Coal and Steel Community, raw materials were not considered a strategic priority for decades, due to the prevailing assumption that industries could access sufficient

volumes of raw materials (EC 1975; Küblböck 2017). As early as from the 1990s on, a significant reconfiguration of global metal production unfolded. Production shifted dramatically from traditional centres such as the USA and Russia, which had previously controlled approximately 6 % and 13 % respectively of global metal supply, toward China as the dominant producer. Between 1994 and 2013, China nearly doubled its share of global metal production, expanding from almost 23 % to 44 % of the total output (Habib et al. 2016). This geographical shift was accompanied by an ever-increasing global production of various metals (Reichl/Schatz 2025), fundamentally reshaping both the scale and geography of primary metal production and establishing new patterns of resource dependency that would be exacerbated in the following years.

In the early 2000s, industry voices in EU debates warned of price volatility, high costs, dysfunctional global markets, and the surging metal demand for digital technologies such as mobile phones and computers (Herditschka et al. 2026). In this context, and influenced by industry and the German Raw Materials Strategy, the EU's Raw Materials Initiative (RMI) was adopted in 2008 (EC 2008). The RMI frames raw material availability as a market driven problem to be solved by private firms, whereas the state should just ensure the right framework. Shaped by free-trade thinking, the RMI emphasised global cooperation and access to external raw materials on equal terms with its competitors (EC 2008). Raw material supply was at this point primarily seen as an economic issue to be resolved by market forces, effectively depoliticising it by presenting it as merely a technical or managerial challenge.

The RMI proposed defining and periodically assessing CRMs as a 'priority action' (EC 2008). CRMs were defined as non-energy raw materials that are essential to industry and have supply chains which are especially vulnerable to disruption, meaning that shortages could seriously threaten economic stability. The EU's first list of CRMs in 2011 reflected this approach, using a quantitative methodology to assess supply risks and economic importance across a wide range of raw materials (EC 2017). This list contained 14 RMs; by 2023, the list had more than doubled to 34, reflecting changing technologies, supply shocks and geopolitical tensions (EC 2023).

4.2 Raw materials at the centre of decarbonisation efforts

After the 2008 financial crisis and in light of the politicisation of the climate crisis, the EU's overarching policy discourse and strategy shifted toward ecological modernisation (Bäckstrand/Lövbrand 2019). Environmental protection was no longer solely interpreted as a constraint on growth, but rather as an opportunity for innovation and competitiveness. At the heart of this win-win narrative was the idea of 'decoupling' economic growth from resource use, suggesting that technological innovation would allow economies to expand while reducing environmental harm and carbon emissions (Krüger 2016). The EU's efforts to align decoupling with green growth resulted in a range of policy initiatives, most prominently the adoption of the European Green Deal (EDG) in 2019. The EDG sought to present a consolidated vision and roadmap for achieving climate neutrality by 2050, laying the foundation for green accumulation strategies. Mineral- and metal-intensive technologies, such as batteries and solar panels, were championed as the 'lifeblood' of this low-carbon economy. Consequently, raw materials were positioned at the centre of decarbonisation efforts and were deemed to be prerequisites for combating climate change (EC 2019). Reports from the EU's Joint Research Centre (JRC), international organisations, and industry stakeholders supported this view by projecting sharp increases in demand for CRMs, driven by the energy transition (Carrara et al. 2023; IEA 2021). The extraction of primary raw materials was thereby seen as a major bottleneck for the transition, sparking EU-level debates on how to secure supply.

The shift towards a green narrative provided space for the inclusion of broader sustainability considerations into raw material policy (Herdlitschka et al. 2026). As a result, a set of sustainability-oriented policy instruments was introduced (e.g., the Conflict Minerals Regulation, the Battery Regulation, and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive), together with a strong emphasis on circularity, recycling (Krenmayr et al. 2026), and 'sustainable mining' innovation. At the same time, under this green narrative, political and industry actors strategically linked sustainability and global responsibility to raw materials, framing resource extraction as necessary for sustainable development and for addressing the climate crisis (Voskoboynik/Andreucci 2022). Despite this green veil, scholars and activists have criticised the instrumentalisation of green narratives to legiti-

mise, sustain, and expand extractive accumulation systems, describing it as ‘green extractivism’ (Dorn et al. 2022; Jerez et al. 2021). The contradictions of ‘green extractivism’ are particularly evident when social-ecological costs are considered. With nearly 50 % of Energy Transition Minerals located on or near land-connected people (Owen et al. 2023), and lithium production increasing between 2000 and 2023 by 1735 % (Reichl/Schatz 2023), rising demand coincides with displacement, land degradation, and social-ecological conflicts (Boafo et al. 2024; Djukanović 2026; Sonter et al. 2020).

4.3 Raw materials at the centre of strategic autonomy

Since 2020, the EU’s approach to raw materials has shifted from being primarily framed through the lens of climate protection to a more strategic and security-oriented perspective. A series of cascading crises – the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, escalating trade tensions between China and the USA, and the complex relationship with the Trump administration – not only collectively exposed the EU’s precarious position in global supply chains but also dramatically heightened the urgency and political necessity of addressing this strategic vulnerability (Glencross 2024). The EU positioned raw materials as central to its strategic autonomy guideline, seeking to reduce “dependence on others for things we need the most” (EC 2020). In line with Ursula von der Leyen’s call for a ‘geopolitical commission’ in 2019 and the geopolitical and geoeconomic turn of the EU (Babić et al. 2022), strategic autonomy incorporates geopolitical considerations, linking both the framing of problems and the articulation of future strategies to secure raw materials explicitly to global power relations and national security. The EU’s experience with Russian gas dependence following the invasion of Ukraine heightened concerns about the weaponisation of CRMs, particularly considering China’s dominance in the sector. While initially framed within a security-sustainability nexus that linked raw materials both to energy transition goals and national security concerns, the discourse has rapidly shifted toward predominantly security-focused reasoning (Crochet/Zhou 2024; Noever Castelos 2023; Riofrancos 2023). Following this logic, CRMs are persistently framed at the political level as security concerns, with the loss of access viewed as a threat to “national survival, economic stability, or geopolitical order” (Le Billon et al. 2025), while explicitly positioning China as the primary source of this threat.

The EU responded with a series of industrial policy measures – from the 2022 Raw Materials Action Plan to the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) adopted in 2024 (EC 2024), and, most recently, the 2025 REsourceEU Action Plan (EC 2025d). The CRMA is the EU’s first raw materials-focused legislative initiative, which was negotiated within just 14 months, reflecting broad political consensus and a strong sense of urgency among policymakers (Vlaskamp 2025). It aims at ensuring “access to a secure and sustainable supply of CRMs and to safeguard the Union’s economic resilience and open strategic autonomy” (EC 2024: Recital 4). The strategic pillar of the CRMA is the diversification of supply, following ambitious – however non-binding – benchmarks for domestic capacities in the extraction of raw materials (10 %), processing (40 %), and recycling (25 %), and strengthened international raw material diplomacy. The main instruments set forward to achieve the benchmarks are Strategic Projects, and relatedly the introduction of the subcategory of strategic raw materials (SRM) (EC 2024). Up until the beginning of 2026, 47 projects in and 13 outside the EU were declared Strategic Projects, meaning they benefit from facilitating, simplifying, and fast-tracking mechanisms. The recent U.S.-China trade conflict has deepened concerns about the EU’s structural dependency, especially after China, in response to U.S. tariffs, imposed export restrictions on 12 REE in October 2025 (Szczepański 2025). Even though negotiations led to a temporary suspension of these restrictions, fears of a production halt due to material shortages became a real threat in the automotive and electronics industries, and reports show that such export restrictions structurally jeopardise key EU policy initiatives – from the energy transition to military modernisation (Hintermayer/Hmaldi 2025). To reduce dependencies and increase Europe’s resilience against supply disruptions, the EC announced the REsourceEU Action Plan in December 2025. With the goal of accelerating and expanding the existing policy strategies, the Action Plan announced that the EU will significantly increase financial support. For long-term resilience, the REsourceEU Action Plan will create a European Critical Raw Materials Centre in 2026 to provide strategic oversight, market intelligence, and coordinated financing to diversify and strengthen supply chains. The Commission will propose export restrictions on permanent magnet scrap, targeted measures on aluminium, and the integration of Strategic Projects

into the EU's foreign direct investment screening regime to ensure foreign investment aligns with economic security goals (EC 2025d).

These initiatives unfold against a backdrop of intensifying conflicts and power projection, from the wars in Ukraine, Iran, and Palestine to the United States' assertive efforts to reassert spheres of influence, underscoring the geopolitical stakes of the current conjuncture. In the EU, the geopolitical upheavals are reflected in an ongoing militarisation and ever-growing defence spending. Next to digitalisation and the energy transition, militarisation is gaining traction as a prominent political project, not only competing for the same CRMs, but with the potential to reshape the global demand for CRMs (Girardi et al. 2023; Johnstone/Marin 2026).

5. The EU's raw material policy from the perspective of SRN

Examining EU raw material policies – and their latest developments in particular – through both their symbolic-discursive and material-physical dimensions enables a more precise identification of shifts in how raw materials are framed and narrated, while capturing how political-economic structures are being (re)configured.

5.1 The symbolic-discursive dimension

To recap, the symbolic-discursive dimension elucidates how society constructs and interprets nature and its proxies, raw materials, and thereby establishing dominant understandings that shape perceptions and usage of nature. Throughout the course of the past 25 years, we can detect a shift in narratives surrounding raw materials: from economic competition to green and, more recently towards more strategic and security-oriented narratives, unfolding along new definitions and problem classifications, as well as the more explicit construction of friends and foes along state lines in the race for raw materials. An important category at the symbolic level is the classification of critical and strategic raw materials. Designating materials as 'critical' both securitises and valorises them (Eyselein/Dorn 2025). In general, this entails the projection of political risks onto the raw material, with the underlying question being whether sourcing countries are seen as trustworthy partners (Gilbert 2020; Laurent et al. 2025). The discursive

justification for why a raw material is deemed critical has shifted across the three phases, thereby shaping how people perceive these materials. The category of strategic raw materials, as introduced in the CRMA, adds to this by emphasising the crucial role of raw materials for strategic technologies: green and digital transition, defence, and aerospace (EC 2026).

On a symbolic level, the label “strategic raw material” not only signals strategic importance, but situates raw materials within a logic of security and geopolitical competition, elevating them from mere economic inputs to matters of strategic necessity. By coupling their relevance to key technologies with supply disruption risks, the designation justifies proactive, potentially state-interventionist measures to secure their access. In this way, ‘strategic’ raw materials become the focus of policymaking, opening the door for urgent and exceptional political measures. Labelling raw materials as strategic is shaped by problematisations of dependency and sovereignty, articulated within both geoeconomic and geopolitical frames. Both frames see the EU’s raw material dependencies as an existential threat to the EU’s sovereignty. In his Raw Materials Week address, Commissioner Séjourné (2025) warned that the EU is at a moment of geopolitical and geoeconomic crisis, and that alarm bells must ring: ensuring raw material supply is fundamental to the EU’s sovereignty. A similar trajectory is evident in Von der Leyen’s speech at the 2025 Berlin Global Dialogue (2025), where she situates the RESourceEU Action Plan within a rapidly changing world order, arguing that acceleration and urgency are needed to keep up and maintain the EU’s geopolitical and geoeconomic competitiveness in this changing landscape: “We learned this lesson painfully with energy; we will not repeat it with critical materials. So, it is time to speed up and take the action that is needed. Whether on energy or raw materials, defence or digital, Europe has to strive for its independence”.

Having already stressed the EU’s vulnerabilities in her State of the Union Address in 2022, von der Leyen warned against repeating the EU’s overreliance on external suppliers: “One country dominates the processing. Out of the 30 critical raw materials, today 10 are mostly sourced from China. So we have to avoid falling into the same dependency as with oil and gas” (von der Leyen 2022). The overdependence on China was long not seen as a problem, as the prevailing assumption was that free-market forces would reliably secure the supply of raw materials. However, in light

of growing concerns about the weaponisation of interdependence, these dependencies are portrayed as posing risks to economic stability and global industrial competitiveness when viewed through a geoeconomic lens. The control over supply chains and diversification is seen as essential for the EU's strive for independence, namely, to be "independent in every dimension that affects our security" (von der Leyen 2026a). Policy responses that follow the strategic lines of diversification, e.g., in the form of restructuring trade relations, stockpiling or onshoring mining capacities, are justified as means of managing these interdependencies and strengthening economic security.

Whereas CRMs are, on the one hand, embedded in geoeconomic arguments, their geopolitical significance is, on the other hand, repeatedly stressed, linking raw material dependencies to questions of power, national security, and defence (Kubilius 2025). This is reflected, for example, in the defence industry's prominent role at Raw Materials Week 2025 and in RESourceEU's warning that the "Critical dependencies for certain CRMs also risk hampering the EU's ability to deliver on its 2030 defence readiness objectives and to militarily support Ukraine, thereby posing a direct security risk and undermining the goals of the European Economic Security Communication" (EC 2025d). This situates raw materials in the midst of international power struggles as the "rising demand for CRMs [...] driving a geopolitical scramble to access resources", in a situation "where other actors deploy non-market practices and behaviours motivated by geopolitical or other non-economic interests." (EC 2025d). Raw materials are viewed through the lens of big power politics, meaning that control over CRMs signals not only industrial capacity but also strategic leverage in the global economy, as well as being a prerequisite for defence capabilities and therefore indispensable for national security (Herranz-Surrallés 2024). The geoeconomic and geopolitical narratives are thus deeply entangled: "the lines between national security and economic security imperatives have become blurred. In fact, they have now essentially merged" (EC 2025d). It is for this reason that we collapse these two under the ongoing dynamic of 'geopoliticisation' (Herranz-Surrallés 2024).

Geopoliticisation is also evident when we focus on the proposed solutions to achieve sovereignty and secure the supply of CRMs, such as the reinterpretation of the circular economy: once justified by sustainability

(Krenmayr et al. 2026), circularity now serves strategic autonomy – and “not for environmental reasons,” as von der Leyen (2025) noted. Furthermore, trade relations and supply chain restructurings are increasingly framed along geopolitical lines. Guided by the concept of friendshoring, new strategic partnerships for CRMs and free trade agreements are pursued with “like-minded partners,” and shared values are prominently emphasised. Examples include the EU-Mercosur agreement, signed in January 2026, which the EC frames as securing access to CRMs, while diversifying away from strategic rivals. Similarly, the EU-Australia Free Trade Agreement stresses shared democratic values and strategic alignment: “Australia and Europe do not just think the same. We believe in the same values. We know we can always trust each other.” (von der Leyen 2026b).

5.2 The material-physical dimension

We understand the co-constituted material-physical dimension as both the abstract social metabolism and the concrete forms through which societies organise their biophysical prerequisites, made visible in economic and territorial configurations, including the infrastructures and built environments that underpin raw material supply systems. To elucidate the shifts analytically, we focus on regulatory instruments, investment incentives, and sourcing strategies that restructure extraction and processing and reroute trade, thereby generating new political-economic structures, infrastructures, and material flows. As shown earlier, the EU has adopted multiple raw material-related policies in recent years. In particular, the CRMA and the RESourceEU Action Plan are noteworthy and have significant impact. Policy instruments such as the Strategic Projects and the announced Critical Raw Materials Centre underscore the EU’s priority of building resilient value chains. They can be understood as instruments that operationalise the classification of raw materials as ‘critical’ or, more recently, ‘strategic’ by translating these categories into concrete policy measures and practices (Eyselein/Dorn 2025).

Forecasts from the IEA (2022) estimate that, by 2030, 50 more lithium mines, 60 more nickel mines and 17 more cobalt mines are needed to fulfil the global demand of CRMs, just for batteries; unsurprisingly, then, Euro-métaux (2025) calls for the opening of 10 mines in Europe and 42 of the first 60 Strategic Projects are dedicated to the extraction level (EC 2025b).

Strategic Projects “considered to have an overriding public interest” (EC 2024: Art. 10.2) are eligible for fast-track approval, coordinated financial support by the EU and its institutions, and are the EU’s primary tool for meeting its 2030 targets. Within the RESourceEU Action Plan, the Commission announces the plan to “accelerate EU-relevant projects by mobilising financial de-risking tools and removing regulatory bottlenecks to fast-track Strategic Projects with the potential to reduce dependencies by up to 50 % by 2029” (EC 2025d). For this, close to €3 billion should be mobilised in 2026, leveraging instruments such as InvestEU, the Battery Booster, the Innovation Fund, Global Gateway, and, where defence-relevant, the European Defence Investment Programme to support CRM projects. Furthermore, several Member States, including Germany, France, and Italy, have launched dedicated funds to support raw material projects, and instruments including IPCEIs (Important Projects of Common European Interest) should be used to extend financing, while complementing EU-level resources and financially supporting and derisking extraction, processing, and recycling projects. Along with the RESourceEU Plan, the EC announced that, for example, the Vulcan lithium extraction project in Germany secured €250 million of financial support from the European Investment Bank, and the EC will unlock extra financial support for the Greenland Resources’ Malmbjerg molybdenum project in order to achieve supply security for the defence sector (EC 2025d; Greenland Resources 2025). The latter needs to be viewed against the backdrop of Trump’s aggressive rhetoric about integrating Greenland into the United States.

These developments signal a shift in EU policymaking: with corporate-friendly industrial policies, including subsidies, de-risking measures and regulatory fast-tracking, the CRMA and RESourceEU aim at securing CRMs through both trade relationships and, increasingly, domestic and regional mining initiatives. This exemplifies the EU’s renaissance of industrial policy efforts, and its reorientation away from free-market thinking: “stronger and faster measures are now required in the EU as market forces cannot deliver the necessary diversification by themselves” (EC 2025d). Embracing market-directing mechanisms such as regulatory interventions, and justified by security of supply (Glencross 2024), the CRMA and RESourceEU reflect what McNamara identifies as the “use of public powers to actively shape markets for the interests and values of a bounded

political community, in ways that overtly represent the government's interventionist role" (McNamara 2024: 2372). As CRMs have shifted from solely economic inputs to instruments of power, increasingly framed through security, sovereignty, and defence, this manifests itself in the form of emergency measures that enable "fast-tracking resource projects or 'national security' exemptions, to help concentrate decision-making power and accelerate the pace of resource exploitation" (Le Billon et al. 2025: 4).

The focus on nearshoring, onshoring, and friendshoring strategies – relocating operations domestically, regionally, or with trusted allies – signals a geographic reorientation towards domestic capacities and expanding CRM-related industry at home. Simultaneously, limited domestic deposits lead to the pursuit of geopolitical alliances and raw material diplomacy, reflecting the EU's move from a global free-trade promoter to more interest-driven, resource-security strategies: in the last four years, the EU established 15 strategic partnerships with countries including Canada, Rwanda, Chile and Ukraine; together with trade agreements such as EU-MERCOSUR, they are framed as "strategic instruments that will help shape Europe's role in the global economy for decades to come" (EC 2025a). Beyond these bilateral partnerships, a number of multilateral initiatives have taken shape, among them the G7 Critical Minerals Production Alliance and the Minerals Security Partnership, the latter having been described as a "metallic NATO" (Home 2022) – reflecting a broader trend toward geopolitical bloc formation around CRMs (Vivoda et al. 2024). Not only will these partnerships reshape trade routes, investment patterns, infrastructure and local economies, but they will pave the way for what Johnstone and Marin (2026) call "militarised supply chains". Focusing on how the surging militarisation reshapes mining, they argue that state and capital priorities are shifting from those of profit or shared green goals to military preparedness and advantage. This includes the intensification of strategic control, as states intervene directly in CRM supply chains, fostering strategic partnerships and alliances, and an urgency that drives accelerated, fast-tracked policymaking.

Taken together, the Strategic Projects and strategic partnerships lead to territorial changes and spatial reconfigurations, creating geographic impacts which include ecological consequences as a result of new (domestic) mining sites, processing facilities and recycling stations. They have there-

fore sparked concerns over environmental and social consequences, as they risk increasing pressure on mining-affected communities and ecosystems while simultaneously shortening periods for public consultation, fast-tracking permits, weakening democratic oversight and safeguards and, in the case of the strategic partnerships, not delivering mutual benefits (EEB 2024; Küblböck et al. 2025). Moreover, the EU's 'simplification' debate, reflected in the Omnibus proposals and revisions to environmental legislation such as the Water Framework Directive, has fuelled concerns about further deregulation.

These instruments promote and facilitate resource exploitation; they are likely to bring new mining sites into play and push the resource frontier outward (Maus et al. 2022). As Faxon and Kintzi (2025: 560) argue: "Extractive frontiers do not end at the mine, but create new metabolic relations that unevenly distribute the benefits and burdens of subterranean exploitation (...) the valuation, extraction, circulation, and exchange of subterranean resources shape the geopolitics of empire and global pathways of accumulation". This uneven distribution of benefits is evident in conflicts over new mining sites; the case of Serbia's Jadar Valley Lithium project reveals the violent and undemocratic character of such endeavours (Djukanović 2026). Triggered by the logic of threat mitigation, mining projects that would likely otherwise fail environmental scrutiny are now being approved under 'security' justifications or labelled 'strategic' by the EU Commission. The expansion of the global resource frontier is therefore met with mounting criticism, given its potential to create new 'green' sacrifice zones and spark conflicts across Europe and, particularly the Global South (Luckeneder et al. 2021; Marin et al. 2024; Zografos 2022).

6. Towards geopolitical SRN?

Considering these intertwined developments and dynamics, we see them as a conjunctural expression of the overall SRN: we propose to conceptualise this as the emergence of geopolitical SRN. We understand 'geopolitics' as material and discursive practices focused on the interaction between political power and spatial/geographical dimensions (Dalby/Toal 2002; Toal et al. 2006; Tuathail/Agnew 1992). CRMs are the object

of geopoliticisation, understood “as the framing of a social phenomenon as a matter of international power competition, inciting the adoption of policies and instruments that aim at fostering an advantage over strategic competitors” (Herranz-Surrallés 2024: 1886). Geopoliticisation functions as a policy frame, implying discursive practices that shape the symbolic dimension of SRN. This often entails the social construction of scarcity and value, as well as acts of securitisation, by means of the creation of existential threat scenarios (Le Billon et al. 2025). The latter legitimise exceptional measures and state interventions, providing the foundation for material practices; understood as “the institutional structures and policy instruments designed to tackle the problematised issue, and their actual implementation” (Herranz-Surrallés 2024: 1883). These measures shape the material dimension of SRN.

As our analysis shows, geopolitical logics, including the securitisation and geopoliticisation of raw materials and related practices, shape the EU’s raw material narratives and structure the symbolic dimension of SRN. At the same time, we observe contentious and dynamic moments of expansion and reorganisation of the resource frontier, including the turn to domestic capacities and the strategic reconfiguration of global value chains. Geopolitical SRN represent a shift in which raw materials become intertwined with security imperatives, territorial control, and great power competition. Rivera and Zamanillo (2025) argue: “Mining Is Dead. Long Live Geopolitical Mining,” meaning that CRMs have shifted from economic commodities to instruments of power and sovereignty, their control being a precondition of shaping the geopolitical, industrial and technological future. CRM supply chains and related infrastructures are no longer primarily organised around economic efficiency or environmental sustainability, but rather increasingly driven by geopolitical considerations of strategic autonomy, alliance building, and the exclusion of perceived adversaries from critical supply chains. In this context, the material and symbolic dimensions of SRN become mutually reinforcing, as security narratives justify territorial interventions and resource extraction projects, while the physical reconfiguration of mining sites, processing facilities, and trade routes materialises these geopolitical imaginaries in concrete spatial arrangements.

Geopolitical SRN are thus structured and manifest across both, that is, symbolic and material, dimensions. These dimensions are dialectically

interrelated: discursive practices shape, and are shaped by, material realities. It is through their articulation that they express a particular constellation of societal-nature relations. Yet geopolitical SRN should not be understood as the sole or inevitable formation – they are, rather, one of several competing constellations – being pushed by specific actors: in the case of our analysis, the EU Commission. While we identify an emerging formation of a geopolitical SRN, it is important to question the extent to which these developments are in fact fundamentally new. A growing body of literature suggests that the nexus between geopolitics, extractive industries, and EU policy is better understood in terms of continuity rather than rupture (Bogojević 2024; Couvreur/Orbie 2026; Hansen 2024). From its beginning, European integration has been embedded in global power politics and structured through external dependencies. What is currently framed as a ‘geopolitical turn’ can thus be interpreted less as a novel shift than as a rearticulation of long-standing orientations toward a more instrumental constellation of societal relations with nature.

Hansen (2024: 1421), for instance, characterises recent developments as a “reunion with the past,” arguing that the contemporary embrace of geopolitics by EU leaders closely follows the footsteps of the Union’s founders. This reading points back to the “Eurafrica” project, conceived in the early years of the European Economic Community as a means to secure access to raw materials and sustain Europe’s position as a global power. Latest initiatives, including the 2024 strategic partnership on raw materials with the Democratic Republic of the Congo under the Global Gateway Initiative, fit into this historical trajectory. Scholars have consistently highlighted that the benefits of these arrangements for resource-producing countries remain highly uncertain (Awuah 2019). Moreover, green framings under the European Green Deal are highly geopoliticised, and serve as the EU’s structural response and new growth strategy to reinforce its position as a global leader in times of the climate crisis (Almeida et al. 2023; Bogojević 2024). By positioning itself as a global environmental standard-setter, EU policies such as the Conflict Minerals Regulation pursue a ‘firsting’ strategy that seeks to generate a moral credo to justify the EU’s stance as a ‘force for good,’ while positioning others as continuously needing to ‘catch up,’ thereby distinguishing themselves from competing actors in a globalised world (Almeida et al. 2023). Although

this is articulated in terms of soft power, it remains underpinned by geopolitical assumptions.

So, what is new about the current situation? We argue that new interconnections are emerging at the intersection of symbolic-discursive and material-physical dynamics. Raw materials shaped by geopolitical interpretations simultaneously reproduce and exacerbate the unequal terms of exchange between the EU and resource-rich countries, which are often located in the Global South. While such inequalities are not new *per se* (Brand/Wissen 2017; Hickel et al. 2021; Lang et al. 2024), the current situation is characterised by the increasing intensity and explicitness with which geopolitical arguments and measures are advanced.

7. Outlook

The focus on CRMs reveals the contradictions inherent in geopolitical SRN: while aimed at securing the supply of CRMs amid rising global competition, the geopoliticisation of raw materials, along with their material implications, intensifies eco-imperialist tensions (Brand/Wissen 2024) and creates new instabilities and conflicts (Dorn 2021). This leads to the intensification of the competition for raw materials which are essential to the global energy transition, driving big powers to create a situation of exclusivity that reproduces neo-colonial exploitation (Lang et al. 2024). Geopolitical SRN create urgency and ‘non-alternative’ thinking, fostering the expansion of resource frontiers in the name of security. This is politically visible in the form of initiatives for deregulation, simplification, and fast-tracking. Ultimately, security and geopolitical logics overshadow vital considerations of sustainability, justice, and the dire need for alternatives that would reduce overall material throughput, minimise extraction, and foster fair distribution. The aggressive pursuit of CRMs magnifies the exact instabilities it seeks to remedy, including issues of decarbonisation and national security. Therefore, it is essential to question the central practices which drive those dynamics and highlight their violent consequences: this encompasses the definition of criticality, the broader geopoliticisation of raw materials, and ultimately the crucial question of what these raw materials are being used for. It is essential to question what is truly ‘critical’ for

our societies: which technologies, which forms of mobility, which modes of living are we striving for, while respecting ecological and social justice dimensions? This implies shifting the focus from supply- to demand-side mitigations and strategies that aim to reduce dependencies by reducing demand (Djukanović 2025). Research in France and the USA has shown that structural changes in the mobility sector, such as reducing vehicle size and weight and expanding public transport, could significantly lower demand for lithium while safeguarding mobility access for the broader population (Pigneur et al. 2024; Riofrancos et al. 2023). Focusing on such structural elements oriented towards sufficiency can offer a way out of the geopolitical SRN and the security lock-in (Bärnthaler et al. 2025; Brand et al. 2025).

In times of multiple crises, geopolitical SRN are positioned as an attempt to counter crisis tendencies and preserve capitalist accumulation amid shifting global competition and power relations. These do not replace capitalist forms but rather coexist and mutually reinforce each other. Therefore, the search for alternative SRN is essential – pathways that transcend the *instrumental* and *geopolitical* domination of nature towards genuine social-ecological transformation.

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ABSTRACT Im Kontext globaler Umbrüche und steigender geopolitischer Spannungen prägt geopolitisches Denken zunehmend die Politik der EU. Am Beispiel kritischer Rohstoffe und damit verbundener EU-Politik argumentieren wir, dass dies die Herausbildung geopolitischer gesellschaftlicher Naturverhältnisse signalisiert. Auf Grundlage einer qualitativen Analyse öffentlich zugänglicher Politikdokumente zeigen wir diese geopolitischen Verschiebungen, indem wir sowohl die symbolisch-diskursive als auch die materiell-physische Dimension von Rohstoffen und Rohstoffpolitik systematisch erfassen und analysieren. Damit nehmen wir eine relationale Perspektive auf geopolitische Entwicklungen ein, die sich von konventionellen neorealistischen Interpretationen abgrenzt und es ermöglicht, gegenwärtige Dynamiken und ihre Widersprüche differenziert zu erfassen.

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