Shifting powers, prospects and perspectives?

A critical reading of the European Union’s geopolitical reasoning on critical raw materials

by

Linda Sztankovics∗

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Abstract. Global energy transitions and rises in demand for critical raw materials (CRMs) are predicted to reshape global politics in yet uncertain but profound ways. With CRMs being vital for Europe's decarbonization process, the present study sets out to examine the EU’s geopolitical discourse by taking an inquisitive yet critical stance focusing particularly on the new “geopolitical” Commission’s geopolitical reasoning on CRMs. Building upon critical geopolitics, a discourse analysis was conducted on 9 European Commission communications (2019–2020). Three key observations were made: first, a ‘geopolitical’ and ‘assertive’ EU is crucial in an increasingly ‘fragile’, ‘polarized’ and ‘competitive’ world. Second, securing CRMs is a ‘security question’, requiring ‘strategic approaches and partnerships’, notably with ‘resource-rich regions’ and particularly with Africa. Third, the EU’s narrative is ambiguous. While classical geopolitical assumptions are distinguishable, it remains questionable whether the EU will depart from its familiar path of liberal cooperation, multilateralism and trade when scouting for CRMs, although its role as a “benign ally” can be questioned. Further studies on the EU’s geopolitical reasoning, along with its actual practice in the area of CRMs, are warranted. Likewise, a critical reading of reports and foresight preceding EU policymaking is encouraged, to better comprehend how the EU’s dominating geopolitical discourse on CRMs and subsequent practice is produced in the first place.

Keywords: European Union, geopolitics, energy transitions, decarbonization, critical raw materials, natural resources, critical geopolitics, discourse.

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∗ Contact information: linda.sztankovics@gmail.com
To my parents, for adding several parts of Europe already to my DNA, to my earliest memories and my vocabulary, and for unconditionally providing me with better opportunities than they ever had my age. Köszönöm.
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References
1. Introduction

“This is Europe’s ’man on the moon’ moment”

Ursula von der Leyen
(EC 2019a)

"L’Europe ne dit pas ce qu’elle fait; elle ne fait pas ce qu’elle dit. Elle dit ce qu’elle ne fait pas; elle fait ce qu’elle ne dit pas. Cette Europe qu’on nous construit, c’est une Europe en trompe l’œil". ¹

Pierre Bourdieu, as quoted in Jennar (2004:1)

It has long been acknowledged by the European Union (EU) that critical raw materials² (CRMs) are crucial for Europe’s climate-neutrality, energy transition, security and prosperity alike. As vital parts of clean technologies, CRMs are required not only for the EU’s renewable energy sources, but also for its defense, aerospace, industry sector and digital transition (COM(2020)474). Being fully dependent on imports of most CRMs, many of which are concentrated to few supply countries or refiners, the union has long dreaded that its previous reliance on fossil fuels might now be replaced by import–dependence on CRMs (ibid).

Following global commitments to meet climate targets, demand for crucial CRMs has soared (World Bank, 2020), accentuating social and environmental concerns relating to their mining (IEA, 2020). While an increase in global demand might not deplete supplies, the risks of exacerbated contentions, social protests, environmental degradation in particularly vulnerable communities and extracting areas are important concerns (see Jowitt, et. al, 2020; Church & Crawford, 2020; Lèbere et. al, 2020; Dietz, 2016; Vakulchuk, 2020). Concerns are also raised regarding CRMs being turned into so–called “green conflict minerals”, due to surging global demand and added commodity value (Church & Crawford, 2020; O’Lear, 2020b). Indeed, the shift to clean energy does not automatically bring with a haven safe from global disputes or tensions relating to resource access or energy security. The unprecedented global acts of shifting power are anticipated to reshape geopolitics profoundly, albeit in yet highly uncertain and debated ways. ³ Moreover, Moran & Russell (2009:2) argues that with “energy security” deemed so central to “national security”, “threats to the former are liable to be reflexively interpreted as threats to the latter”.

¹ “Europe doesn’t say what she does; she doesn’t do what she says. She says what she doesn’t do; and she does what she doesn’t say. This Europe that they have built for us is a trompe l’œil” (own translation).

² For a proper definition and current list, see EC (2020) COM(2020)474.

³ Indeed, the future risks and challenges are yet highly uncertain, with scholars taking various stances and expecting different risks and scenarios depending on their equally different assumptions of the development of both geopolitics and renewable energy. However, quoting Vakulchuk. et. al (2020): “What we nevertheless can see from the literature is that the geopolitics of renewables will probably be different from the geopolitics of fossil fuels, regardless of whether it is more peaceful or not”. For an extensive overview of current literature, debates and camps on renewables, CRMs and geopolitics, see Vakulchuk,. et. al (2020).
Global geopolitics, prospects and energy sources are changing – and so is the EU. As of 2020, two seemingly different yet closely interconnected power shifts lay at the heart of its policies, forming and framing the future of the union and beyond. In December 2019, the newly elected president Ursula von der Leyen announced the strengthening of the EU’s ‘geopolitical clout’ as one of the main priorities of the new 2020–2024 Commission (EC, 2019a). While the explicit use of the term geopolitical is somewhat unprecedented, the EU’s ambition to strengthen its assertiveness and global power is not; a geopolitically strategic narrative replacing its former “transformative” one was adopted already in the union’s 2016 EU Global Strategy (Barbé & Morillas, 2019). Nonetheless, geopolitical language becoming more salient is a quite remarkable shift seeing that the term has been actively avoided by the union during much of the post-Cold War era (Bialasiewicz et.al 2009). Pledging to lead a “geo–political” EC in lieu of the former political one, the overarching ambition of becoming a “stronger Europe in the world” is now vowed to underpin all of the EC’s future initiatives and actions, including its equally unprecedented and simultaneously launched new growth strategy towards climate-neutrality titled the European Green Deal (COM(2019)640).

With CRMs regarded ‘vital’ to its green growth and energy transition alike alongside its new “explicit” geopolitical aspirations, is the EU now considering abandoning its founding advocator Jean Monnet’s advice on cooperation instead of confrontation when scouting for new sources of power beyond its borders? Indeed, these concurrent shifts against the background of global energy transitions and changing geopolitical conditions prompt several questions on the prospects of EU’s new geopolitical ambitions relating to its external energy security policies and securing of CRMs. Thus, the following thesis will attempt to scrutinize precisely the EU’s new geopolitical discourse, focusing specifically on its reasoning on CRMs.

1.2 Aim

The main purpose of the present work is to provide a deeper understanding of the EU as a global (geo)political actor. Taking on an inquisitive and explanatory stance (Diez, 2014b), the work sets out to examine the EU’s new geopolitical turn from the stance of critical geopolitics, by scrutinizing how it presents and narrates “places, peoples and dramas” (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992:1) in relation to its securing of CRMs. By critically examining the union’s representation of the world and ‘dramas’ surrounding CRMs, the present work also seeks to provide an insight into why and how the EU’s external energy practices can come about – and more specifically, what geographical and geopolitical imaginations enable and justify them in the first place. (Tuathail & Agnew, 1992:192).

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4 The use of the following quote owes entirely to Magnus Ekengren and his “A return to geopolitics? The future of the security community in the Baltic Sea Region” (2018) in which the following lines were encountered for the first time by the author of the present work:

“One impression predominates my mind over all others. It is this: unity in Europe does not create a new kind of great power, it is a method of introducing change in Europe and consequently in the world … the Europeans have built up the European Community precisely in order to find a way out of the conflicts to which the nineteenth-century philosophy gave rise” (Monnet, 1962:26).
While there is extensive (though not exhausted) previous research on the EU’s global power and actorness, also concerning its external energy policies and energy security, literature focusing specifically on the EU’s new explicitly geopolitical ambitions and agency in relation to global energy transitions and securing of CRMs is still yet emerging. However, and to the best of knowledge, few previous studies centering on EU’s (geo)political discourse and agency have been conducted along the lines of critical geopolitics.

1.3 Research question

The research question is two–fold and formulated as follows:

• What are the key features of the EU’s geopolitical reasoning and representation of “places, peoples, and dramas”?

• How are CRMs, in turn, brought into that particular geopolitical representation?

2. Previous research

While literature on the EU’s external energy policies has hitherto and almost exclusively focused on fossil fuels, a few important observations on the Union’s previous external energy discourse and subsequent policies deserve mentioning. Similarly, a brief resumé of critical analyses on the EU’s (geo)political discourse and narration of itself as a global actor brings clarity to its current geopolitical reasoning also in relation to CRMs.

2.1 The EU’s global ‘actorness’ in brief

It would, however, be a significant blunder to proceed without first briefly mentioning previous discussions on the EU’s ‘actorness’ and the type of power it exerts. The EU’s global actorness, power and leverage have been important research topics for almost four decades, with conceptualizations ranging from European soft power and superpower, to civilian, normative, transformative, smart and beyond (e.g. Duchêne, 1972; Galtung, 1973; Whitman, 1998; Manners, 2002; Cross, 2011; Diez, 2014a). With scholars taking different stances, the EU’s global agency and power remain a puzzle, if not a paradox both in theory and in practice (e.g. Zielonka (ed), 1998; Tonra, 2009). With no intention of adding further fuel to such debates, the EU’s global leverage also seems to depend upon other actor’s perception of the union’s global agency (Lucarelli & Fioramonti, 2010). Similarly, its actor capacity as reconceptualized by Rhinard & Sjöstedt (2019) appears increasingly relevant – that is, what the EU does and performs rather than what it “is”. The EU’s geopolitical discourse might then well be understood as one such type of ‘performance’, or at least the preceding practice that produces its foreign policies (e.g Aydn-Dzgit, 2015).
2.2 EU’s external energy policies and practice

Recurring observations made by scholars on the EU’s external energy policy discourse seem to be those of misalignments between narrative and practice, along with conflicting narratives. As stressed by Youngs, it is vital to recognize precisely the EU’s *sui generis* and its “balance of realpolitik and liberal–cooperative dimensions” (2014:6) to understand the union’s external energy security policies and geopolitical discourses. Oftentimes, the EU seems to “hover uncertainly between a ‘market–governance’ and ‘geopolitical’ philosophy” (2009:174). Whereas the EU usually stresses a “strong commitment to market–based approaches”, member states, on the other hand, have not seldom become “more geopolitical and cut across some of the basic principles enshrined within internal market rules” (2009:4). Owing much to the fact that both energy and foreign policies have remained largely the preserve of its member states, coherent and consistent EU-approaches to “energy security” has equally as often been identified as the very “missing link” within EU’s external policies (Andoura, 2012).

Inconsistencies are not, however, merely due to the union’s institutional nature and the sovereignty of its member states. The EU’s very own policies have also been inconsistent at times, pledging on one hand to uphold democratic norms, while in practice partaking in “clear cases where energy interests overrode support for democracy and human rights reforms” (2009:5). Concerns on the EU’s pursuit of a rather exploitative external energy policy, misaligned with its simultaneous global social sustainability ambitions, has often been raised not least in relation to CRMs (2014b:103).

2.3 Critical discourse analyses

Taking the stance of critical geopolitics, literature on the EU’s geopolitical discourse on climate change in general, and energy in particular, is painfully scarce. One worth mentioning is Proedrou (2020), who provides an insight into the incorporation of climate concerns in EU’s foreign policy, concluding that the union seems to be following a ‘traditional geopolitical mindset’. Szulecki (2020) laments precisely the lack of critical geopolitical assessments not only on energy security in general, but also moving beyond fossil fuels, as well as the traditional ‘four A’s’ of energy security. 5 On the EU’s self-narration of its global ‘actorness’, the findings of Larsen and his identification of a discourse “according to which the union is constructed as a unit which defends its own interests and has an obligation to take on responsibilities in the light of international challenges” is worth mentioning (2004:69; see also 2000). Similarly, Diez (2004) has brought attention to the EU’s ‘othering’ in its increasingly ‘geopoliticized’ identity construction. Such othering seems to be noticeable also in the EU’s new explicit geopolitical narrative, seeing Youngs’ conclusion that the “[EU] supposes that threats to liberal order are due entirely to others’ actions; yet member

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5 Like geopolitics, ‘energy security’ is a multifaceted term (Högselius, 2019). The ‘four A’s’ refer to IEA’s (2020) long-standing definition of energy security as “availability, accessibility, affordability, and acceptability”. Seeing energy security “as an instance of security in general”, Cherp & Jewell (2014) seek to reconceptualize energy security as “security for whom? for which values? from what threats?”.
state governments have themselves often acted in ways that compound the fragilities and imbalances of the current global order” (2020:2). Also Lynggaard’s (2019) analyses focusing on the EU’s foreign policy discourse as a “strategic resource for policy–making” can be mentioned, although he clearly pays less attention to discourses seen as a type of power/knowledge; a notion that underpins critical geopolitical analyses and most other post–structural analyses. Against this previous research and the earlier provided context, an inquisitive, albeit critical, reading of the EU’s new geopolitical aspirations focusing specifically on CRMs seem not merely well–timed, but warranted and motivated.

3. Methodology: a summary

The study is designed as a qualitative case study (Bennett & George, 2005:17-19). Not only is such a design suitable to answer precisely the type of “how”–questions posed, but it is also consistent with the theoretical framework and method applied (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Taking the methodological stance of critical geopolitics, the study deploys a textual discourse analysis of the EU’s geopolitical reasoning concerning CRMs, as narrated and presented in 9 EC communications relating to CRMs, decarbonization and geopolitics. Since critical geopolitics is based upon the same ontological and epistemological postulates that acknowledge the constructive effect of language and discourse on social practice, the theoretical approach and method applied are closely intertwined (see Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Müller, 2010; Jørgensen & Philips, 2002; Foucault, 1972, Fairclough, 2003). Müller (2010:15) clarifies that “critical geopolitics does not work with discourse analysis as an instrument but it rather is discourse analysis” (italics in original). For the sake of clarity and transparency, however, critical geopolitics and discourse analysis are given their respective clarifications below. To better understand the approach that constitutes critical geopolitics vis-à-vis its ‘conventional’ counterpart, the next section will begin by introducing the ‘common-sense’ or ‘classic’ understanding of geopolitics as reflected upon from a critical stance.

4. Theoretical approach

4.1 Geopolitics

Geopolitics is a “notoriously slippery term” (Högselius*, 2019). While often used as a label for a wide range of different conceptualizations and practices within international affairs (Moisio, 2015), it is most commonly understood as the nexus of politics, geography and power within global politics (ibid; Högselius, 2019; Flint, 2017). Since coined at the turn of the 20th century (see Deudney, 2013), geopolitics has traditionally been used along the lines of realist perspectives to describe the foreign policies and practices of ‘great powers’, power rivalries and their underlying

* I am beyond grateful to prof. Per Högselius, his support and generosity in providing me with a copy of his eloquent historical account titled Energy and Geopolitics (2019), upon emailing him about his course given at KTH Royal Institute of Technology. Without inspiration and insights from his book, this thesis would not have been written.
geographical features (Dalby, 2010). Besides its association with *realism* within international relations, geopolitics has historically also been ‘tainted’ (Högselius, 2019), notably by its association with deterministic relationships between geography and global politics, the Nazi policies of ‘Lebensraum’ (Hagan, 1942; Jacobson, 1968), and expansional war-waging practices. Consequently, it became less salient within research on political geography, particularly in the immediate wake of the World War II (Kuus, 2017; Agnew, 2013; Ó Tuathail, 1996). With the reintroduction of ‘geopolitics’ during the Cold War, the term came to be associated with the strategic zero-sum, bipolar world-order and rivalry between the US and Russia (Agnew, 2013) – only to be downplayed again in the 1990s in favor of *globalization* and the growing impact of the latter on international relations and politics (Rogers, 2012; see also Kliot & Newman, 2001; Fukuyama, 1989; Ikenberry, 2014). ‘Geopolitics’, then, became rather outmoded in the new post-Cold war era, with some scholars seeking to replace it with ‘geo–economics’ (Luttwak, 1990; Blackwill & Harris, 2016) or more idealistic conceptualizations such as ‘geo–governance’ (Falk, 1995). Political geographers, however, questioned such notions of the ‘end’ of geopolitics, and re-conceptualized geopolitics as a *discursive* and *representational practice* preceding ‘common-sense’ geopolitical actions (Ó Tuathail, 1997). Around the mid–2000s, ‘classical’ geopolitical actions saw a new surge notably within literature on the geopolitics of energy, resource scarcity and notions of ‘peak oil’ (see Goodstein, 2004; Klare, 2008; 2012; Yergin, 2011; 2020). Today, a steadily growing body of literature is turning its attention to the hitherto unprecedented challenges and concerns on the *new geopolitics of decarbonization* and climate change.7

In its ‘generic’ sense then, the term is referring to the interplay of political (including economic), geographical and power factors, and their impact on global power relations, inter-state interactions, foreign policies and strategic interests (Kuus, 2017). The “classical” or “conventional” conceptualization has not seldom been used by, and subsequently conscribed, *realist or neo-realist perspectives* (Högselius, 2019; Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998), supposing not only that the world–order is the very “realm of power and interest” (Donnelly, 2000:9), but also assuming that the study of ‘geopolitics’ is an inherently ‘objective’ enterprise. In a defense of Mackinder’s (1904) criticized yet remarkably influential ‘Pivot–Heartland’–theory, Gray (2004:17) vindicates precisely such a classical notion of geopolitics, by stating that “[g]eopolitics is a variant of classical realism and should not be controversial.” The adding of ‘classical’ or ‘traditional’ prefixes to geopolitics is hence not to be understood as a type of geopolitics ‘belonging to the past’; on the contrary, contemporary geopolitical accounts share many of the key “classic” features (Moisio, 2015). Rather, it refers to

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7 The era of the ‘Anthropocene’ and unprecedented decarbonization processes will most certainly shape and re-define not only geopolitical practices and imaginations, but international politics and relations alike. On the geopolitics of decarbonization, see e.g. Church & Crawford (2020); Ghosh (2016); Goldthau & Wessels (2019); Overland (2019); The Economist (2020); Tänzler, Wright & Oberthür (2020); Vakulchuk, Overland & Scholten (2020); Van de Graaf, Bond, & Overland (2019). On the geopolitics of climate change, see e.g. Barnett (2007), Dalby (2013); (2014); 2020; Haldén (2007); Moïsi (2020, Oct. 3); Oberthür (2016); O’Lear & Dalby (2015).

8 The use of perspectives in plural owes to the fact that realism cannot be described as one coherent perspective; rather, realism consists of different theories united by a somewhat common philosophical and historical heritage. See Donnelly (2000).
Geopolitics in its “common-sense” gist – that is, geopolitics seen as merely practice and raison d’état (Agnew, 2013). The dominating and traditional view remains that of geopolitics as being the nexus of politics and ‘geography’ detached from political theory or ideology, enabling the ‘objective’ study of an equally ‘objective’ world and geopolitical practice (Sharp, 2020). The following quote from Gray (2004) serves to exemplify both why geopolitics became ‘unpopular’ in favor of ‘globalization’, while also illuminating the conventional assumption of geopolitics as the ‘impartial’ mirroring of a ‘world’ “as it is”:

“Geopolitics treats the world as it is and tends to skepticism over the prospects for progress towards lasting peace. Because much of the academe holds to the liberal illusion that international relations can be transformed benignly, it associates geopolitics, and its generally realist approach to statecraft, with conditions that need to be changed” (2004:18).

According to critical political geographers, a world ‘as it is’, however, is based upon assumptions of a neutral (geo)political and geographical reality (Dalby, 2013; Agnew, 2013; Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998; Kuus, 2017). While strategic interests, global power relations and foreign practices have changed continuously throughout the course of history, ‘classic’ notions of geopolitics often fail to acknowledge that geopolitical/graphical imaginations and representations of the world have changed, too – and that they are representations and not impartially mirroring a world ‘as it is’. It is precisely these particular ‘impartial’ assumptions that critical geopolitics, then, aims to make visible and question.

4.2 Critical geopolitics

Critical geopolitics deliberately sets out to alter the ‘objectivity’ of geopolitical discourses, narratives and analyses of the same by making visible precisely how the ‘world’ is represented and prescribed certain features (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). From its critical gaze, geopolitics is to be understood as the “discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft ‘spatialize’ international politics and represent it as a world characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas” (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992:1). As an “approach”, critical geopolitics emerged at the end of the Cold War by geographers, and notably political geographers, seeking to reclaim and resuscitate the tainted concept of geopolitics within their respective field of research (Dodds & Sidaway, 1994; Dodds, 2014; Agnew, 2013; Kuus, 2017). Adopting a constructivist view and drawing upon Foucauldian and post-structural foundations,9 ‘classical’ or ‘conventional’ geopolitics was to be “thought of as a regime of power/knowledge that produced international politics as an objective global spatial drama, a ceaseless global struggle between determined geographical entities, and as a vision of territorial states dominating global space” (Ó Tuathail, 1997:41). In this sense, geography is seen as “an inescapably social and political geo-graphing, an ‘earth-

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9 See also Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), which continues to influence literature on critical geopolitics. His elucidation of how “imaginary geographies” as tools of power/knowledge shaped the way the ‘Orient’ was looked upon, and how such representations, in turn, enabled/constrained not only certain political actions towards the Orient but also what could be thought and said about “that part of the world” remains ever so relevant. See also Stuart Hall’s The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power (1992), along with Walter Mignolo’s The Idea of Latin America (2005).
writing’ (…) a cultural and political writing of meanings about the world” (Ó Tuathail, 1999:109). Geopolitics, in turn, “is a writing of the geographical meanings and politics of states” (ibid). Indeed, preceding and producing ‘common-sense’ geopolitical practices are several discursive and representational practices that embeds the world with meaning, making “meaningful and justified” certain (geo)political actions in the first place (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992:191). Hence, geopolitics is “more than the competition over territory and the means of justifying such actions: geopolitics is a way of “seeing” the world” (Flint, 2017:40, italics in original).

By deploying discourse analysis (Müller, 2010) to understand and uncover “the ways in which the use of particular discourses shapes political practices” (Sharp, 2020:195), its critical gaze then illuminates the various partial and situated geopolitical representations and imaginations that precede, enable and constrain “common-sense” practices (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992:192). In the words of Agnew (2013:19), its critical aim must be understood

“As the critical sense that world politics is underpinned by a myriad of assumptions and schemas about the ways in which geographical divisions of the world, strategic plans, global images, and the disposition of the continents and oceans enter into the making of foreign policy and into the popular legitimation of those policies.”

Agnew (2001:10; 2009) also highlights the rhetorical and communicative functions of such geopolitical representations. Critical geopolitics as a school of thought, then, is “less a theory of how space and politics intersect than mode of interrogating and exposing the grounds for knowledge production” (Hyndman, 2010:317).

The very representation of ‘places, peoples, and dramas’ also produces what Flint (2017) refers to as states’ and other geopolitical actors’ geopolitical codes. Geopolitical codes consist of “a set of political geography assumptions that underlie a country’s foreign policy” (Flint & Taylor, 2011:49) and constitutes the means through which they ‘orientate themselves’ towards the world. Such geopolitical codes define, decide and dominate how actors view upon their agency, role and interests and serve to justify the actors’ identity and practices (2017:52). “Understanding the concept of geopolitical codes allows for an analysis of the multiple agendas that countries face and the diversity of policy options that are available to address them” (Flint, 2017:77). Deconstructing geopolitical reasonings and codes alike means paying attention to the specific representations of “places, peoples and dramas”, along with an interrogation into the construction and narration of particular risks, threats, dangers and interests (O’Lear, 2020; Campbell, 1998; Weldes; 1996).

In contrast to “classical” geopolitics, geopolitics is not considered the preserve of statecraft only; non-state/non–institutional actors are likewise important in shaping discourses and global politics alike (Flint, 2017:15). Geopolitics then is “inescapably cultural” and “plural” (Ó Tuathail, 2009:316). Divided into formal, practical and popular geopolitics, critical geopolitics scrutinizes both the geo–political/graphical assumptions that underpin geopolitical reasoning within formal research and academia; the spatial imaginations and representations by ‘traditional’ (‘practical’) political institutions; and lastly, representations as they are produced (and re–produced) within popular culture, news and media (Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998:5;
Dodds, 2014:46). While the different loci of reasonings can be scrutinized separately (the EU’s geopolitical reasoning is essentially a form of practical geopolitics), overarching ‘geopolitical discourses’ are seen as the very synergy of these different spheres of reasoning intertwined (Flint, 2017).

Laying at the kernel of critical geopolities is the problematization of geographical ‘facts’ shaping (geo)politics, instead of the other way around (Kuus, 2017). Although united in their critical gaze and main traits, critical geopolitics is not a coherent field lacking internal debates or pluralism (Kuus, 2017). Rather, it consists of several different currents paying attention to specific questions and issues within geopolitical discourses and practice alike (Sharp, 2020; Power & Campbell, 2010; see, for instance, Agnew, 2013; Campbell, 1992; Dalby, 2014; Enloe, 2014; Müller, 2008; O’Lear, 2020; Sharp 2000). Hence, critical geopolitics is a methodology rather than a one specific ‘theory-based approach’ (Kuus, 2017). As such, its critical gaze also (though not necessarily) entails an emancipatory ambition (Routledge, 2003). After all, discourses, along with representations, are “never static but constantly mutating” (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992:193).

4.3 Environmental geopolitics

One of the subfields focusing specifically on the representations of risks and security threats relating to environmental features within geopolitical narratives is environmental geopolitics (see O’Lear & Dalby). Its main purpose is "to better understand the co-constitution of environmental and geopolitical narratives and praxes" (O’Lear 2020:70). Environmental geopolitics questions the traditional and dominant view of human–environmental interactions based upon the simplistic assumption that environmental features cause (geo)political challenges and difficulties, rather than the other way around (Moiso, 2012). It seeks to bring attention to the ‘multiple dimensions of human–environmental interactions’ (O’Lear, 2020a:195). In relation to resources, it investigates “how (...) resources are identified, made distinct, measured, and portrayed as something, somewhere, to be secured or that pose a particular threat requiring a response” (2020c:2). “Risks”, in turn, and their influence on geopolitical narratives, build upon Beck’s definition of them as “future events that may occur, that threaten us” (Beck, 2009:10; (O’Lear, 2020c:5). O’Lear also states that “claims about both risk and security are tied to claims about power” and the ways in which “a particular [environmental] phenomenon is brought into geopolitical narratives and political agendas will shape how it is portrayed as relevant for risk or for security” (2020a:194 & 199). Similarly, environmental geopolitics “draws attention to geopolitical knowledge and agendas that involve environmental features in making claims about why certain places, practices or actions are important” (O’Lear, 2020b:2) The purpose of its critical gaze is to convey "how spatial agendas from different political vantage points draw upon environmental concerns and objectives to justify actions or inactions". (O’Lear (2020b:2), and is essentially “a project to think otherwise about the kinds of power shaping the places, patterns, and spatial processes of the world today” (2020c:2). As such, it is “perhaps the most “policy-relevant” subfield” within critical geopolitics” (Moisio, 2015:227).
4.4 Critical approaches to security, threats and national interests

Acknowledging the impacts of dominating discourses and narratives is obviously not the preserve of critical geopolitics only. Similar to critical geopolitics, however, other critical approaches also question the simplistic assumption of impartial adequacy to reality (Campbell, 1992). While an in dept resumé of different notions of security, risks, and national interests cannot be provided, a brief mentioning of some key concepts is warranted as they have also influenced the theoretical framework of this study. On national interests, Weldes (1996) brings important clarity to how particular social constructions shape foreign policies. Discourses on “national interests” should be understood as social constructions, and not, as in most claimed ‘realist’ conceptions, “objects that have merely to be observed or discovered” (1996:280). Rather, a national interest “is constructed, is created as a meaningful object, out of shared meanings through which the world, particularly the international system and the place of the state in it, is understood”. (1996:267).

Geopolitics is tightly linked not only to claims about security, but also to the specific actions that such claims produce. Securitization studies have made important contributions to how certain issues become ‘securitized’ through the dynamics of ‘speech acts’ (see Buzan, Waever & de Wilde, 1998; Bialasiewicz et al., 2007). Similarly, Campbell’s (1998) analysis of US foreign policy and identity shaped by the discursive constructions of ‘differences’ and ‘dangers’ (see also Sharp, 1996) elucidate how seemingly discursive practices have had concrete material and practical consequences. Following Campbell’s notion of security, a wide range of issues – not least those stemming from the securing of CRMs, energy transitions, or climate change in general– hence serve as “potential candidate(s) for new discourses on danger” (1998:171).

5. Method

There is essentially no other method as useful to address the EU’s geopolitical reasoning and to make visible the “assumptions, knowledge, and agendas [that] hold [its geopolitical] statements together” (O’Lear, 2020) than discourse analysis. Müller (2010:15) clarifies that “critical geopolitics does not work with discourse analysis as an instrument but it rather is discourse analysis” (italics in original). Critique is often raised, however, against the fact that critical approaches (in general) often caution against a one single ‘universal’ discourse analytical approach, along with the fact that ‘critical geopolitical analyses’ often lack specific accounts of how their analyses have been conducted. For the sake of clarity, methodological transparency

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10 Similar to Campbell, critical geopolitics draws heavily upon Jacques Derrida’s notion of binaries, dualism and opposites. See Müller (2013); Diez (2004).

11 Owing to its critical nature, there is no single decided discourse analysis approach required when taking a critical geopolitical stance. Different types of discourse analyses, both qualitative and quantitative, have been applied within research in combination with critical geopolitics. Acknowledging the difficulty of developing a universal blueprint to be employed for a wide range of different cases and questions, Müller (2010), however, calls for an increased “methodological transparency”, stating that “(…) in view of the multiplicity of understandings and methodologies, it is not sufficient for a transparent analysis in critical geopolitics to simply state that one is ‘doing a discourse analysis’.”
and stringency then, the following section will try to concretize a discernable analytical method to be deployed when examining the selected EU documents. Before proceeding to the questions and specific focal points which will facilitate the task of analyzing the EU’s geopolitical reasoning, the main features and ontological notions of discourse analysis as a methodology will briefly be introduced.

5.1 Discourse analysis: a methodology

To begin with, discourse is not merely the synonym of ‘language’ or ‘conversation’, but rather refers to ‘a particular way of talking about and understanding the world’ (Jørgensen & Philips, 2002:7). Discourse analysis, in turn, is a methodology rather than a method (Jørgensen & Philips, 2002; Angermüller, 2001; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997), since it is based upon "philosophical (ontological and epistemological) premises regarding the role of language in the social construction of the world" (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002:11). While discourse analysis refers to various and different approaches (Van Dijk, 1997) analyzing ‘language’ and its constitutive (or the mutually constitutive) effect on social practice (see, for example, Foucault, 1972; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Fairclough, 1992), the common denominator is the idea that language “is not just a mirror of other social practices or a smokescreen covering up what is ‘really happening’” (Larsen, 2018:62). The world is not simply available to objectively decipher, but it is made meaningful only through the ways by which we perceive, interpret and conceptualize it using language (Campbell, 1998:6). Language, then, is often seen as an instrument of action and power (Bourdieu, 1980). Discourses, however, are neither static nor stable but rather contingent and may change over time. (Jørgensen & Philips, 2002:14). Similarly, there are also several different discourses present in any given moment.

5.2 Discourse within critical geopolitics

Discourse analyses within critical geopolitics are strongly influenced by Foucault’s poststructural notions of discourse as the mutually constitutive relationship between power and knowledge along with the function of discourses as “truth regimes” (Foucault, 1972, Fairclough, 2003). In the words of Foucault, discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention” (Foucault, 1972:49). Discourses then are seen as always constituting rather than merely describing (Escobar, 1995). Functioning as ‘truth regimes’, they also serve as methods of sustaining a certain view or representation of the world (Dittmer, 2009:280). Within critical geopolitics, such ‘truth regimes’ are understood as geopolitical reasonings/narratives which are seen as “declarative (‘this is how the world is’) and then imperative (‘this is what we must do’). ‘Is’ and ‘we’ mark its commitment to, on the one hand, a transparent and objectified world and, on the other hand, to a particular geographically bounded community and its cultural/political version of the truth of that world” (Ó Tuathail, 1999:107). Consequently, geopolitical discourses bring with them a specific knowledge, a
particular way of seeing, describing and narrating the world, which in turn enables and justifies certain (geo)political actions. The purpose of analyzing geopolitical discourses or reasonings then is to make visible the assumptions and premises upon which a specific reasoning is based; thus, to question the uninterrogated adequacy to reality and ‘to uncover the various modes of representation that result in certain geographies becoming self-evident” (Dittmer, 2009:275).

5.3 Beyond representations: discourses as performativity

While critical geopolitics does not prescribe a particular approach to discourse analyses, Müller (2008) argues that geopolitical discourses benefit from being (re)conceptualized, and accordingly scrutinized, as both language and enacted practice (ibid: 329). In other words, how “discourse is manifested and reproduced in policy languages and in policy practices” (Jensen & Richardson, 2003:16). Indeed, critique is often raised against the distinction between representations versus the ‘materiality’ or ‘embodiment’ of geopolitical discourses (Moisio, 2015; Bialasiewicz et al., 2007). From such a performatve stance, ‘geopolitics’ is constituted and enabled not solemnly through specific (linguistic) ‘representations’, but through the enactment and constant re-enactment of the specific discourses, practices and actions (see Bialasiewicz et al., 2007 & Butler, 1998).

By focusing foremost on discursive/linguistic geopolitical representations, textual analyses do not, however, dismiss or reject concrete geopolitical practices. However, they claim that it is only through linguistic discourses that practices are “made meaningful and justified” in the first place (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 192). To exemplify such a stance, confrontations, conflicts or wars waged under the label of geopolitics can be seen the very epitome of “how discursive [geopolitical] constructions turn into social practice, how representations and imaginations grounded in discourse turn into powerful instruments of political actions” (Reuber, 2009: 441).

Although the exclusion of ‘performance’ might rightfully be criticized, it is possible to study the textual and the practical spheres of geopolitical discourses separately (Jensen & Richardson, 2003:16; see also Fairclough, 2003:2). 13 Seeing that the research question in this thesis centers on the EU’s new explicitly geopolitical reasoning on CRMs, alongside the lack of concrete ‘geopolitical’ practice available to analyze performed under its ‘geopolitical turn’, the present work will logically adhere to the textual-oriented 14 discourse analysis (see also Larsen, 2004).

13 Additionally, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002:4) state that “it is possible to create one’s own package by combining elements from different discourse analytical perspectives and, if appropriate, non-discourse analytical perspectives”.

14 Future studies seeking to address the EU’s geopolitical reasoning should indeed seek to incorporate the union’s (geo)political practice and performance into its analysis, along with scrutinizing other (formal and popular) locations of geopolitical reasoning, while also moving beyond merely the EC as the practical institution.
5.4 Observing ‘places, peoples and dramas’

Fundamental to any textual analysis is to ask questions to the material, in order to make visible what is not always explicitly manifest (Esaisason et. al., 2017; Kronsell, 2006; O’Lear, 2020b; Bacchi, 2009). For inquiries into geopolitical reasonings, questions help to “disentangle elements of geopolitical claims” (O’Lear, 2020b:5). To facilitate the task, one might well borrow from Bacchi’s (2009) ‘What’s the problem represented to be?’ question–toolbox aimed at problematizing policy problem presentations and their presuppositions (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016): “What are the [particular places, peoples and dramas (risks & threats) relating to CRMs] represented to be? What are the presuppositions or assumptions that underpin that particular representation? Also, what claims are made about ‘the environment’, CRMs and human–environmental interactions and what are agendas do they obscure? (O’Lear, 2020b). In addition, one can proceed to ask not only what [practices and policies] this particular representation produces, but also – remembering the changing nature and emancipatory ambition discourse analyses – whether the [the particular representations] could be thought about differently.

Indeed, such questions help to make visible what is “often not as explicit as we would prefer” (Dittmer, 2009:282). Similarly, O’Lear (2020b) brings attention to the fact that the role and meaning of certain things or issues (geographical–political/environmental features, risks, dangers or threats) are rarely specified. Such ‘self-evidence’ play part in promoting, naturalizing and stabilizing a particular view or agenda (ibid) or a geopolitical “truth regime” (Dittmer, 2009). Hence, Kronsell’s (2006:110) advise to “question what seems self-explanatory and turn it into a research puzzle, in a sense, by making the familiar strange” is key when conducting a discourse analysis.

Bearing the above questions in mind when reading the empirical material constitutes the study’s main strategy of analysis. It begins by reading the selected documents in search for sections relating explicitly or ‘implicitly’ to the global dimensions or ‘geopolitics’ of CRMs and the EU’s subsequent geopolitical agency. Having identified specific paragraphs and sentences, the pieces will subsequently be examined and analyzed along the lines of critical/environmental geopolitics focusing on the particular representation of ‘places, peoples & dramas’, along with human–environmental interactions, risks, and threats.
5.6 Empirical material

Aiming to outline the contours of the EU’s ‘new geopolitical’ reasoning on CRMs, 9 official EC communications issued between 2019-2020 were chosen. The range of potentially selectable material was delimited both by institution (EC/EP/GSC)\(^\text{15}\) and topic (relating to geopolitics, foreign policy, CRMs, energy, decarbonization, renewables and climate). Cross-references within the communications also helped the selection. Taken together, the communications are believed to give a decent, though by no means complete, overview of the core geopolitical representations that underpin the EU’s current geopolitical reasoning to CRMs.

### Table 1: Selected documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EC</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COM(2020)37 – Commission Work Programme 2020: A Union that strives for more</td>
<td>2020.01.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COM(2020)474 – Critical Raw Materials Resilience: Charting a Path towards greater Security and Sustainability</td>
<td>2020.03.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JOIN(2020)5 – EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024</td>
<td>2020.03.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COM(2020)493 – 2020 Strategic Foresight Report – Charting the course towards a more resilient Europe</td>
<td>2020.09.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COM(2020)562 – Stepping up Europe’s 2030 climate ambition</td>
<td>2020.09.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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\(^{15}\) The EC and EP also issue many important outlooks, reports, studies and foresights through specific EU agencies and think tanks, but since such documents “reflect the views only of the authors” and not those of the EC/EP, they were excluded.
5.7 Considerations and missing pieces

Before proceeding to the analysis, a few caveats need to be addressed.

First, a critical examination of the EU’s geopolitical reasoning on CRMs is clearly a vast undertaking. The following results are by no means exhaustive nor saved from others critical gaze. Neither does the thesis claim to fully comprehend the EU’s geopolitical reasoning, discourse or subsequent practice on CRMs. A major shortcoming is the fact that not all relevant policy documents, communications or strategies are yet available to analyze (notably the forthcoming EU Green Diplomacy Network). Discourses, including geopolitical ones, are also constantly changing (Jørgensen & Philips, 2002; Flint, 2017) and should be critically examined continuously as they unfold. Notwithstanding the study’s limitations, the observations of a few key geopolitical representations in the selected documents do provide at minimum the contours of the EU’s current reasoning on CRM; hence, the study helps to better understand the EU’s geopolitical and global “actorness” both in general and specifically in relation to CRMs.

Second, it must be reiterated that any type of study – and interpretative ones in particular – suffers from the slips of subjectivity. While aiming to detach oneself and analyze ‘objectively’, the selection of research problem, methodology applied, interpretations and conclusions claimed are all exposed to and already dependent on the author(s) own comprehension of the world. That is precisely what critical geopolitics is reminding us about.

Finally, a scrutinization of the EU’s practical geopolitical reasoning by analyzing a few selected official EC/(EP/GSC) documents provides but a fraction of the whole picture. Dominating and overarching geopolitical discourses are created as the synergy of formal, practical and popular reasonings intertwined (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). An important missing piece behind the very foundations of the EU’s geopolitical reasoning has not been included in this study. By providing theoretical background and support to the EU’s policymaking, a large number of analyses, studies, foresights and reports conducted by various non–institutional actors play an equally important role in the shaping of the EU’s geopolitical reasoning and subsequent policies. To give but a few examples, the last SOER–report (2020) by the EEA provides policymakers not only with an outlook, but “knowledge for [the EU’s] transition to a sustainable Europe”. Similarly, a chapter titled “What if ... a country restricted access to rare earth elements?” in EUISS Chaillot Paper 157 narrates a fictional future of how such a scenario would impact the EU, and what specific geopolitical measures the EU should be taking as per today. Hence, the EU’s discourse and policies are shaped by a substantial number of actors besides the official institutions – not only when it comes to CRMs but other areas alike. To get an even better and deeper understanding of the EU’s geopolitical discourse, then, these other loci of

[15] There is an updated version of the GSC Conclusions on Climate Diplomacy (2020); however, CRMs are not addressed.
reasoning should also be subjected to the same scrutiny, alongside the EU’s (geo)political practices and performances in addition to its discourse (see Müller, 2008).

6. Analysis

The key findings in the EU’s geopolitical discourse and geopolitical reasoning on CRMs are presented in the following two sections. To better understand the EU’s geopolitical reasoning on CRMs, the first section provides an account for the major features of the EU’s overarching geopolitical reasoning as conducted from the different communications. The second part centers on the EU’s geopolitical reasoning focusing specifically on CRMs. Space limitations do not allow for a clear separation of “results” versus subsequent discussions; hence, the observations will be presented, analyzed and commented on in tandem. For transparency, words and quotations are emphasized and the specific communications are referred to by their COM–number to the extent required. Conclusions, along with the ending discussion, are given their own, final subsection.

6.1 Towards “A union that strives for more”

How then does the EU represent the “places, peoples and dramas” of the world in which it finds itself? The very first observation made upon reading the communications is the fact that geopolitics has indeed found its way into the EU’s lingua, both explicitly and also within more implicit representations and assumptions. Equally evident is the fact that both the EU’s green ambitions as well as its new, explicit geopolitical aspirations are thought of as the union’s ‘momentum’ – or the EU’s ‘man on the moon’–moment.

A recurrent theme in all communications is the narrative of a world in dire need of a ‘stronger’, more ‘assertive’, ‘strategic’, ‘autonomous’ and essentially ‘geopolitical’ union. It suffices to read the title of CWP2021 to comprehend that union finds itself in a world of “fragility”. The latter refers foremost to the current COVID19–pandemic; however, it is made explicit that “changes in climate (…) and geopolitics” (CWP2021:1) are also contributing to the increasingly ‘precarious’ world.

It is also this very representation of the world beyond its borders that, in turn, calls for the EU’s ‘geopolitical’ turn. While a ‘geopolitical’ EU is seen as a prerequisite for the union’s prosperity, security and maintenance of its ‘competitiveness’ as the “world’s trade superpower” (von der Leyen, 2019), the ‘geopolitical’ EU is also seen as the world’s ‘vitality’ and its indispensable, benign ally (CWP2021). In line with Larsen’s (2004:69) findings on the EU’s discourse, the EU’s seem to continue not only to defend its own interest by geopolitical language, but its geopolitical turn is also an obligation to the world. In relation to climate change, it is stated precisely as the EU’s ‘moral obligation’ to show leadership in accelerating energy transitions, and also in influencing the rest of the world to follow suit (COM(2020)562:22). The EU is taking on a role as a solution-finder not only to its own, internal divisions, but also to a ‘precarious’ world
characterized precisely by ‘tensions’ and volatility: several “simmering tensions, economic uncertainty, exploding conflicts and moving geopolitical plates” are narrated as shaping today’s global order (CWP2020).

The EU’s narration of itself as essentially different from the rest of the world is discernable and also in line with the ‘othering’ noted by Diez (2004). On one hand, the EU belongs to the world and its collective challenges, and must hence act accordingly. On the other hand, however, there are several imaginations of the world to which it does not belong – one of them being the ‘largest and upcoming emitters’ (COM(2020)562). This particular self-perception seems to mirror von der Leyen’s stating that EGD is Europe’s “man on the moon” – moment (EC, 2019a). Not only is the EU taking ‘competitive’ global ‘lead’ through its accelerated energy transition, but it will also find itself in a unique position vis-à-vis “large” and “upcoming emitters” – categories to which the EU itself does not belong. Such self-evidence, or geopolitical “truth regimes”, clearly obscures the equally common—sense fact that such ‘large’ and ‘upcoming emitters’ (that is, countries not belonging to the union) are not emitting in a vacuum, but rather – and to a great extent so – due to demand stemming precisely from the ‘world’s largest single market’.

Similarly, while recognizing that instability is, to some extent, to be found also within the union’s own borders, it is evident that the call for a “stronger”, “united”, and essentially “geopolitical” union is not foremost a solution to its own internal divides, but serves as another way of essentially differentiating the EU from the rest of the world. By presenting a “strong” and “united” union, the EU is no longer part of prevailing global “divisions” and “tensions” in a world of ‘polarization’ and ‘fragility’. The EU’s ‘exceptionalism’ as sui generis in its role as a global actor is also a recurrent theme: EU is essentially a “unique aspiration”, which is underpinned by and needs to ‘promote’ its core liberal values (von der Leyen, 2019).

Similar type of ‘othering’ is also deducible from the narration of its global agency in an ‘increasingly polarized’ world (CWP2021:5). It is precisely the polarization and ‘geopolitical landscape’ that forces the union to underpin its future policies by ‘strategic foresights’ (CWP2021:2): “what happens outside the EU can have a critical impact on security inside the EU” (COM(2020)605:1). The world is “precarious” and ‘evolving threats’, “climate change, demographic trends and political instability beyond [its] borders” pose serious security challenges to the EU (COM(2020)605:1). It is obvious that the world in which the EU finds itself is not becoming more stable or peaceful, but rather “ende(d) and fragment(ed)” (COM(2020)493). While acknowledging that the “security environment is continuously changing” (COM(2020)493:16), the narratives do, however, place an enhanced emphasis on quite one–sided scenarios, fearing the “shifting balance of power” (ibid) alongside “economic measures driven by political considerations, such as the extra-territorial impact of sanctions or protectionist measures” which “pose challenges” to the union. In accordance with Youngs (2020) analysis, the EU’s discourse seems to be based precisely around the narrative that threats to global multilateralism and liberal principles are primarily stemming from beyond its borders: the world’s ‘anchor of stability’, that is, multilateralism, is being challenged in “unprecedented ways” (CWP 2020:6). ‘Multilateralism’ and a ‘rule-based global order’ is accredited the longstanding
global ‘peace’ and ‘stability’ for which the EU has played a key part and for which it has taken on the role as a solution-finder. Such multilateralism, however, needs now not only to be “upheld”, but also updated to be “fit for today’s world” (CWP 2020:6). What such an update entails and how it will be made “fit for today’s world” is, however, unclear. Neither is it specified what ‘today’s world’ is; one understands, however, that it is increasingly fragile, fragmented, polarized and fiercely competitive. Similarly, what the EU means by “geopolitics” is nowhere explicitly defined.

Much in line with Youngs’ findings (2009; 2020), the narrative of the EU’s own geopolitical agency also seems to be characterized by two somewhat conflicting narratives and representations. On the one hand – given the current ‘nature’ of the global political order, the EU is obliged to prioritize its ‘strategic interests and objectives abroad’. This is, again, clearly in line with the traditional language of geopolitics as objective ‘strategic interest’ necessitating specific and adequate actions – in this case, the EU becoming geopolitical. On the other hand, however, the EU continues to resort to the liberal principles upon which the union is based, and upon which its global agency has long rested. The EU seeks to remain the world’s ‘anchor of responsibility, stability, cooperation and solidarity’ (CWP 2021:5). Yet it will do so by mobilizing ‘all [its] instruments’ – without, again, explicitly stating what such, possibly geopolitical “instruments”, are.

With the question still looming large, the ‘strengthening [of] the EU’s contribution to rules-based multilateralism’ (CWP 2021:5) alongside its enhancing of market-based rules are, however, presented as the key means through which it seeks to assert its ‘geopolitical’ power. It is also made explicit that it is precisely the EU’s “extensive global trade capacity [that] underpins its geopolitical power and resilience” (COM(2020)493). Similarly, it is the EU’s “long-standing capacity and legacy in shaping international standards and norms” that constitute one of its main “geopolitical capacities” alongside its position as a major trading block (ibid). Indeed, “leveraging its financial resources in support of its political objectives” might well be understood as its main method of geopolitical leverage.

Speaking the language of ‘critical geopolitics’, however, the EU’s representation of the world as represented by the above characteristics might well be understood as precisely the type of “truth regime” that becomes ‘self-evident’ in geopolitical reasonings and representations. Indeed, the specific features of the world and the very meaning of “geopolitics” remain scarcely specified and unquestioned throughout the documents, also in relation to CRMs.
6.2 Critical raw minerals: securing supplies?

Upon reading the selected documents, it is evident that CRMs have been brought into not only the EU’s broader geopolitical “strategy”, discourse and particular geopolitical representation, but also into its discourse on its security and interest; as such, CRMs are now entwined in claims about possible threats, dangers and risks. CRMs, their “undistorted access” and “security of supply” are recognized in all documents as vital both to the EU’s deliverance on its green growth, energy ambitions and prosperity (COM(2019)640:8), as well as for its “digital, space and defence applications”. Access to supplies is not only a “pre-requisite to make [the energy] transition happen” (ibid:8) but it is also an emerging EU “strategic interest”. In fact, it is made explicit already in the first sentence in COM(2020)474 that “access to [critical metals, minerals, materials, rare earth elements] is a “strategic security question”.

At stake is essentially the union’s “resource security” – and as such, its security and prosperity in general. The “securing of supplies” of “strategic raw materials” is equally a “strategic interest” as it is a “strategic security question” (COM(2020)474:1). While somewhat far-fetched, the question of whether CRMs might eventually become securitized looms large upon reading the EU’s presentation of the global dimensions of its ‘securing of supplies’. The EU’s climate mitigating policies, such as the required energy transition outlined in its EGD, is to a great extent motivated by a narrative of climate change along with its “disasters” threatening to “undermine [the EU’s] security and prosperity” (CWP2020:2). With climate change simultaneously becoming not merely an increasingly prioritized issue, but also one relating to the union’s very security, the possible ‘securitization’ of climate change might, precisely through green energy transitions as the mitigating policy to the former, lead to a subsequent securitization of access to CRMs.

It is, however, not as much a narrative of securitization as it is of acknowledging its vulnerabilities and painting future risk scenarios. In this sense, the narration on its securing of CRMs is much in line with its reasoning for why a ‘stronger’ and more ‘assertive’, ‘geopolitical’ Europe is needed – that is, because it is facing an increasingly ‘fragmented’ world, where multilateralism is “eroded” and “global competition is becoming more fierce”, with the latter particularly felt in the area of CRMs (COM(2020)474:1). A “more strategic approach” (COM(2020)474:7) towards CRMs is required against the background of the union’s dependency on foreign supplies and current lack of both “strategic autonomy” (helped by future recycling/reusing techniques) and ‘resilience’ when facing veritable supply risks. Enhanced rule-based trade, close partnerships and diversification of supplies are seen as solutions to such risks stemming from beyond the union’s borders. Keywords relating to the import–dependence on third countries are precisely “diversification” and “undistorted access”, which seem to presuppose that markets will be volatile, competitive or the EU’s secure access threatened by the prevailing “dramas” of the world, which might put its own “resource security” stake.

Enhanced global bilateral and multilateral, “mutually beneficial” cooperation by the EU is likewise required, including the safeguarding of an “international level playing field” (COM(2020)562) for market competition. The EU is, at the same time, “protecting [itself] from unfair and abusive practice” (COM(2020)474:1). Its presentation of its own
position and agency seems much in line with the reasons for why its geopolitical agency is needed, and also why the ‘rest of the world’ benefits from its geopolitical agency, “strategic partnerships” and “mutually beneficial cooperation”. The “mutuality”, however, might well be interrogated into, as will be shown below with the case of Africa.

Indeed, while seeking to “lead international efforts and (...) build alliances with the like-minded”, “it also recognizes the need to maintain its security of supply and competitiveness even when others are unwilling to act” (COM(2019)640:2). In line with its overarching geopolitical reasoning, the world in which CRMs are to be ‘secured’ – or ‘competed’ for – seems to be ‘divided’, ‘fragmented’, ‘polarized’ and made up by “the like–minded” and the ‘others’. How the EU seeks to secure its supplies “when others are unwilling to act” (COM(2019)640:2) and whether such an approach would entail the departing from its dominating diplomatic and market–based path remains unclear. Strikingly evident, however, is the fact that the EU is presupposing that threats to multilateralism, trade, and rule–based markets alike – and hence, its own energy and resource security – will be due to others’ actions, or in–actions.

It is evident that the EU seeks to leverage its power first and foremost by economic means. Indeed, the leverage of its position as one of the “world’s largest markets” is presented as a key priority in securing access to supplies. Moreover, its potentially normative power is also hinted in the communications, when stating that the union will “continue to be resolute in addressing non–respect of international obligations by third countries” (COM(2020)474:15), “in line with its commitment to enhance enforcements activities of trade” (ibid). Again, the ‘othering’ recurs in its own self–perception, that is, the EU’s as benign sui generis merely facing other ‘third countries’ who in turn account for the disrespect of mutual obligations, market–rules or similar lacks of cooperation. This is particularly remarkable considering Youngs’ previous findings that EU’s own member states have previously accounted for such breaches of – for example – market principles in external energy questions (2009).

The EU seems to continue being stuck “between a ‘market–governance’ and ‘geopolitical’ philosophy” (Youngs, 2009:174) also when reasoning on CRMs. However, it is clear that its “geopolitical philosophy” is becoming increasingly prominent, and particularly so in relation to “resource–rich” countries and regions. Stating that “there is large untapped potential for building sustainable and responsible strategic partnerships” (COM(2020)474:15), it is subsequently made clear that “such strategic partnerships (...) are particularly relevant for resource-rich countries and regions such as Africa”. One might well ask precisely who such partnerships are “sustainable” and “responsible” for. Africa, being one of the most resource–rich continents, while also expected to become the largest market for renewable energy owing to its anticipated population growth (IEA, 2019), is presented as “particularly relevant” for the EU’s “strategic partnerships” (COM(2020)474:15).17 It is subsequently, and explicitly, recognized

17 While not one of the officially selected documents, it is noted in JOIN(2020)4 titled “Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa” that “Climate change, increased competition for natural resources, environmental challenges, lack of basic social services, pandemics, and other health threats are additional sources of instability” (p. 11). When pledging to support African countries by “taking into account full spectrum of challenges deriving from root causes of
that the “high supply concentration in countries with low standards of governance poses a security of supply risk [to the EU]”, while the particular combination of those two also risks “exacerbating environmental and social problems” (ibid). The union’s representation of Africa is therefore particularly interesting and the EU’s image of itself as a “benign ally” to the countries on the continent requires a thorough scrutinization. While not necessarily unhelpful per se, the EU’s “help to [its] partner countries to develop their mineral resources sustainably” is clearly masking the union’s own agenda— that is, motivated foremost by its securing of its own “resource security” and unrestricted supply of “strategic raw materials”.

This underlying and arguably obscured agenda is perhaps even more prominent when “global population growths”, owing largely and precisely to population growth on the African continent, are on one hand related to fears on the “availability of resources”, while they are simultaneously related to “political, economic and investment opportunities”, on the other. It is said explicitly that the union must “make the most of” such opportunities presented on the African continent (von der Leyen, 2019). The very same developments are, however, simultaneously feared. Under the very first geopolitical priority of the EC, CWP2020 makes an interesting remark relating precisely to “global population growths” when stressing the union’s need for preparedness when facing changing global conditions and shifting “global power structures”. Global population is de facto expected to grow until 2050 (UN, 2019). Such increases, however, are located entirely outside the EU’s borders and concentrated mostly to the African continent (ibid). The EU’s own growth rate, on the contrary, is expected to shrink. Its required preparedness for the impacts of global population growths on “the availability of [1] natural resources or on [2] migration flows” is then particularly interesting; it seems to be underpinned by (or rather obscuring) the notion that major threats both the EU’s own internal security (that is, “resource–security” to ensure prosperity and safety) as well as to global stability (rising energy demand which will require yet more resources, affecting “availability”) are stemming from beyond the EU’s borders – that is, from global population growth. 18

Although population growth might well increase global (clean) energy demand, the underlying assumption that population growth impacts the “availability of natural resources” or leads to increased “competition” or migration is somewhat simplistic and rather one–sided. Besides concealing the underlying perceived “threat” to the EU, it also fails to acknowledge the crucial questions of security for whom and from what. As for population growths and energy demand (and, subsequently, the “availability of natural resources” as stated in the communication) the latter two depend not on the

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18 In COM(2020)241 titled “Report (…) on the impact of demographic change”, it is stated that “the share of Europe’s population in the world continues to shrink (pg. 1), which will, in turn, have implications for the EU’s geopolitical outlook and role in the world, necessitating “the EU to speak and act as one, leveraging all of its collective strengths and diversity” (ibid: 3). EU, then, “will need to be stronger, united and more strategic in the way it thinks, acts and speaks.” (ibid: 31).
sheer size of a population, but rather the number of people having access to energy. 19 The “opportunities” for “untapped potential” (COM(2020)474:15) in Africa and other resource–rich countries, on one hand, and the fear for the “availability of resources”, on the other, are conveying two conflicting assumptions on the relationship between population growth and resources, while being unified, however, by being based upon the same underpinning agenda. Unless the EU steps up its “mutually beneficial” promises in actual practice, the “strategic partnership” with Africa risks remaining precisely strategic, and at worst merely a masking of the union’s own agenda on ensuring its own “resource security”.

It remains to be seen what the EU’s “strategic partnerships with resource–rich third countries, making use of all external policy instruments and respecting its international obligations” (COM(2020)474:15) will entail in practice. The EU has, however, pledged that its ‘securing’ of CRM through ‘strategic partnerships’ will “go hand in hand with responsible sourcing” (ibid:16). In COM(2020)474, there is also an explicit reference to the new Conflict Minerals Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2017/821) that came into effect in January 2021. The regulation mandates importer due diligence on four 20 so–called ‘conflict minerals’ sourced from conflict–affected and high–risk areas (CAHRA’s), hence restricting them from being imported to or refined within the EU. 21 Although concerns are continuously raised on the possibility of CRMs vital for green transitions becoming precisely such “green conflict minerals” 22 due to spiking demand, none of the CRMs crucial for the EU’s climate–neutral ambitions are, however, included in the regulation. It remains to be seen whether they eventually will.

The main focus throughout the documents remains nonetheless the EU’s own securing of supply, and on mitigating the possible risks, shocks and distortions within trade and markets. It is concluded that all actors within the EU, companies, governments and EU–institutions alike, need to be “much more agile and effective in securing a sustainable supply of critical raw materials” (COM(2020)474:18). “Sustainability” here is, however, clearly referring less to environmental and social sustainability in the so–called “resource–rich” countries, as it refers to the IEA’s definition of energy security being the “uninterrupted availability of energy sources at an affordable price” (IEA, 2020).

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19 In the IEA’s Energy Outlook for Africa (2019), it is estimated that global energy poverty will become “increasingly concentrated, with 90% without access to electricity and almost 50% without access to clean cooking in 2040 living on the African continent”. Similarly, “although the size of the [African] economy in 2040 is four–times larger than today, total primary energy demand is only 50% higher”.

20 There are several minerals and ores (many of which are vital to global energy transitions) that might fall under the label ‘conflict minerals’. The new EU regulation, however, currently only recognizes “titanium and tungsten, their ores, and gold originating from conflict–affected and high–risk areas” (CAHRA’s). For the indicative, non–exhaustive list of identified CAHRA’s under the Regulation 2017/821, see RAND Europe’s Cahralist, available at: www.cahralist.net

21 Besides the fact that many other conflict minerals are not included in the regulation, concern is also raised whether the regulation has loopholes for technology companies and already refined products containing such minerals, among others.

22 Among many, cobalt from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is, unfortunately, coming to mind. Currently, 68% percent of the EU’s imported cobalt comes from DRC. Although conflicts & human rights abuses are linked to extraction in DRC following spiking demand, global legislation on “conflict minerals”, including EU Regulation 2017/821, are however not explicitly applicable to cobalt (Church & Crawford, 2020).
7. Conclusions

7.1 Discussion

Three major observations on the EU’s geopolitical reasoning concerning CRMs were deduced from the material: first, a ‘geopolitical’ and ‘assertive’ EU is crucial in an increasingly ‘fragile’, ‘polarized’ and ‘competitive’ world. The latter is felt particularly in relation to its securing of CRMs. However, by becoming geopolitical, the EU is not merely protecting its own prosperity and pursuing its interests, but its geopolitical ‘actorness’, power and influence are seen as a ‘moral obligation’ to the changing state and condition of the world. Its geopolitical turn and reasoning on CRMs is essentially also based upon a presentation of itself as the ‘benign ally’ to the rest of the world’s countries.

While it does not seem as if the EU intents to leave Monnet’s advice behind when scouting for CRMs beyond its borders, the union does, however, speak the explicit language of traditional and classic geopolitics whenever global dimensions or Europe’s agency and leadership in the world is mentioned in the communications. An equally interesting, while not surprising, observation is the lack of a clear, coherent definition of ‘geopolitics’. The term ‘geopolitics’, as well as the world requiring a geopolitical EU, lack a good definition and serve as self-evident ‘common sense’. The need for a geopolitical EU fits perfectly into the representation of the “geopolitical landscape” as a “polarized” and “fragile” world in which the EU’s new “geopolitical” turn is direly needed – not only for the union’s own prosperity and security, but also as a ‘moral obligation’ for the “others”.

Regarding CRMS, the securing of vital green sources for power is deemed a ‘security question’, requiring ‘strategic approaches and partnerships’, notably with “resource–rich regions” and particularly with Africa. While it is impossible to question the EU’s veritable necessity of CRMs, seeing that they are indeed vital to its energy transition, the salience of words such as “security”, “strategic interest” and “resource security” begs the question of whether the issue of securing CRMs will eventually become ‘securitized’. Seeing the cruciality of CRMs for climate change mitigation acts (such as green energy transitions) and the global securitization of climate change, it is an important question to ponder. However, such a possible “securitization” of CRMs or other green energy sources depends in the end on many different factors, including those beyond the EU’s own discursive control. Nonetheless, CRMs can well be considered a “potential candidate for [European] discourses on danger” also by merely reading the selected communications (Campbell, 1998).

The third observation, much in line with Youngs (2014:6) findings, is that the EU’s narrative remains ambiguous: while classical geopolitical assumptions are indeed distinguishable both in its representations of the world (notably ‘self-evident’ claims of a world ‘as it is’, geopolitical ‘truth regimes’ and the realist presentations of possible power rivalries and polarization), the EU is strongly seeking to steer and stay away precisely from such ‘traditional geopolitics’ by pursuing its “open strategic autonomy” based in liberal market principles. Indeed, it remains questionable
whether the EU will depart from its familiar path of trade, multilateralism, cooperation, and diplomacy when scouting for CRMs. However, as the EU’s very resource-security and ultimately energy security, “prosperity” and “safety” depends largely upon its actual access to supplies (with the latter deemed a “security question”) it is clear that the union is aspiring towards becoming and acting both stronger, more assertive, and geopolitically to the extent possible when securing its CRMs.

Whether or not it will succeed in performance is to be decided by the traditional debates; yet one must recognize that narratives and representations are also in themselves already a type of power, regardless of whether they will be ‘enacted’ upon accordingly or not. What the union also consistently fails to recognize or admit in its representation of “places, peoples, and dramas” are the multitude existing within its own borders, along with the consequences that might follow. Similar to Youngs (2020) conclusions, it is obvious that ‘threats’ to liberal–market approaches and global multilateralism are narrated as stemming from outside of the union. By assuming so, the EU however, dismisses the possibility that some ‘erosions’ of global multilateralism or market–rules might, in fact, be caused by the EU’s very own member states.

Its presentation and narration of the world also conceal the fact that divided visions, representations and policies might prevail within the union itself. This serves perhaps first and foremost as a discursive strategy in order to communicate European unity by all means. As such, it constructs an image of the union not primarily as the very ‘sui generis’ that it is, but rather one as the ‘vital’, ‘benign ally’ or ‘anchor’ to the ‘fragmented’, ‘polarized’ and ‘fragile’ world in which it motivates its geopolitical ambitions, versus all the world’s ‘other’ places and peoples.

As shown with the case of Africa and the EU’s new “strategic partnerships” with other “resource-rich” countries alike, the EU presentation of itself as the “benign ally” might well be questioned. It remains to be seen what its forthcoming “EU Green Diplomacy Network” will entail in terms of policies aimed not merely (and implicitly) at ensuring its very own “resource-security”, but also the extent to which such policies will actually be in line with the scarce considerations expressed relating to the EU’s “sustainable and responsible” mining and extraction promises. More importantly, it remains to be seen what the union will do in practice. As patterns from the past have shown, there have previously been “clear cases where energy interests overrode support for democracy and human rights reforms” (Youngs, 2009:5). Hence, the previous concerns on a possible pursuit of a rather exploitive external energy policy, simultaneously masking but equally based upon its very own raison d’État, remain valid (Youngs, 2014b:103).

Ultimately, the EU’s current geopolitical reasoning deducted as the rather ambiguous narrative between a world characterized by “classical geopolitical” features on the one hand, and its liberal, diplomatic but equally “strategically” underpinned market–based agenda, on the other, seem to open up for a yet uncertain but rather wide range of possible practices on CRMs by the EU, equally enabled as they are constrained. It would indeed be a faulty exaggeration to claim that the union might, due to its new
“geopolitical turn”, eventually leave Monnet’s advice behind when scouting “strategically” and “assertively” for “strategic” CRMs beyond its borders. Bourdieu’s statement that ‘Europe doesn’t say what she does, nor does she do what she says, but rather says what she doesn’t do, and does what she doesn’t say’ remains, however, important to bear in mind. Whether it also applies to the EU’s future external energy and “resource–security”–policies on CRMs, along with its ‘geopolitical’ foreign policies in general, will be revealed soon enough.

7.2 Missing pieces revisited

Along with the yet missing official documents that would have enriched this study profoundly, the other loci of geopolitical reasoning which have not been assessed in this study deserve a final remark. The EU’s geopolitical reasoning is clearly not produced only by the EC or by its other official institutions, but to a large extent by the various reports, outlooks and foresights preceding their policies (see also reflection by Dodds, 2001:473). Indeed, it is often recognized in communications that further research is needed to support policymaking. Who, then, produces the geopolitical and geo-graphical knowledge and representations upon which such policy-making is later based? What significant pieces in our understanding of the EU’s geopolitical ambitions, alongside its geopolitical representations, are missing when failing to include the various documents that do “not convey any position of the European Commission”, yet provide policymaking with (geo–graphical and geo–political) “knowledge”, “support” along with several underlying assumptions, imaginations, representations and claims? If critical geopolitics is “less a theory of how space and politics intersect than a mode of interrogating and exposing the grounds for knowledge production” (Hyndman, 2010:317, emphasis added), any claims about the EU’s ‘grounds of (geopolitical) knowledge’ production deducted from merely scrutinizing official discourse by the main institutions will be hyperbole at worst, and insufficient at best. Although it is indeed the EC’s geopolitical discourse that ultimately ‘decides’ the EU’s geopolitical policymaking, such ‘dominating’ discourses are, however, preceded by discursive struggles: they, in turn, have provided the very “boundaries of the kinds of policies which can be legitimately pursued” (Diez, 2014b:329). Analyzing how “discursive struggles” can make certain assumptions and imaginations prevail and enter into the EU’s practical reasoning and making of its foreign policies seems increasingly relevant. Moreover, they open up for a wide range of future research topics, areas and locations within other policy areas as well. Such future research requires by no means less of a critical gaze, but merely one that shifts its perspective and stretches its scope.
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