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Article

Governing the EU's Energy Crisis: The European Commission's Geopolitical Turn and Its Pitfalls

Marco Siddi [1,2,*] and Federica Prandin [3]

[1] Finnish Institute of International Relations, Finland
[2] Department of Political and Social Science, University of Cagliari, Italy
[3] Faculty of Political Science, University of Helsinki, Finland

* Corresponding author (marco.siddi@fiia.fi)

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Abstract
European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has been promoting the concept of a "geopolitical Commission" since her appointment in late 2019. Since then, successive crises—the Covid-19 pandemic, the ever-worsening climate crisis, and the war in Ukraine—have tested the Commission's intention to turn the concept into practice. This is particularly evident in the field of energy politics following Russia's attack on Ukraine. When the war started, Russia was the EU's largest energy supplier. The EU's desire to end its energy dependency on Russia called for "geopolitical actorness," notably swift political and diplomatic initiatives to find alternative suppliers considering the rapidly changing geopolitical circumstances. To what extent and how did this occur? Did the Commission achieve its goal of becoming a geopolitical actor in the field of energy politics? What does geopolitical actorness imply for the EU's energy policy and low-carbon transition? The article addresses these questions through an analysis of policy documents published by the von der Leyen Commission between 2019–2023, including the communications on the European Green Deal and Critical Raw Materials Resilience, the EU Hydrogen Strategy, the Global Gateway, the REPowerEU Plan, the External Energy Strategy, the Solar Energy Strategy, and the Green Deal Industrial Plan. The article argues that EU policy priorities progressively shifted from a focus on broad multilateral cooperation and open strategic autonomy to more narrowly defined strategic partnerships with "like-minded" Western and neighbouring countries. The 2022 war in Ukraine was a strong catalyst for this shift.

Keywords
energy; European Commission; European Union; geopolitics; Russia

Issue
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1. Introduction

In November 2019, in her first press conference, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated that she would lead a "geopolitical Commission" (von der Leyen, 2019). According to her, this meant making the EU "a champion of multilateralism." At the same time, she argued that the EU should "invest in alliances and coalitions to advance [its] values," "promote and protect Europe's interests through open and fair trade," and "strengthen [its] partners through cooperation." Achieving technological sovereignty and leading in climate action were central pillars of her proposed strategy.

Von der Leyen's geopolitical agenda was a response to what she described as "an unsettled world, where too many powers only speak the language of confrontation and unilateralism" (von der Leyen, 2019). Three and a half years later—after a pandemic, Russia's attack on Ukraine, growing US–China competition, an energy

supply crisis, and several emergencies related to the ongoing climate crisis—the polycrisis facing the Union has only worsened. As von der Leyen's mandate nears its end in 2024, it is timely to evaluate the Commission's declared geopolitical shift. This article provides an assessment by analysing policy documents regarding the European Green Deal and the EU's energy transition that were published by the Commission between December 2019 and March 2023. A focus on documents concerning the European Green Deal and the energy transition is particularly instructive due to the almost all-encompassing nature of this policy area, which covers broad domains from energy to industrial strategy and external relations. Moreover, the selected timeline is apt for assessing how the Commission's choice of language and policy priorities changed over time, in response to mounting multiple crises.

The article argues that, over this period, the EU policy priorities progressively shifted from a focus on broad multilateral cooperation and open strategic autonomy to more narrowly defined strategic partnerships with "like-minded" Western and neighbouring countries. The 2022 war in Ukraine was a strong catalyst for this shift. Geopolitical logic became central in the Commission's policy documents, but in a narrower sense than in von der Leyen's 2019 definition. Most notably, securing supplies of critical raw materials (CRM) and hydrogen, leading in the domestic production of low-carbon technologies and reducing reliance on—especially non-Western—trade partners became more prominent in the documents than some of the concepts stressed by von der Leyen in her 2019 speech, such as multilateralism, trade openness, and value-driven cooperation.

Analysing the nature and extent of the Commission's geopolitical shift in energy policy is important because issues of energy supply, governance, and sustainability are central to current EU politics. The EU depends heavily on energy imports from abroad, hence guaranteeing the flow of necessary supplies is essential for the future of the EU's economy and the well-being of its societies. While scholarly literature has debated a progressive EU turn to a strategic geopolitical stance in energy policy for well over a decade (see for instance Boersma & Goldthau, 2017; Goldthau & Sitter, 2014; McGowan, 2008; Siddi, 2019; Siddi & Kustova, 2021), this shift has accelerated markedly since 2022. Moreover, energy policy is closely interrelated with climate policy. The choices that the EU makes in energy policy affect the Union's greenhouse gas emissions levels, and therefore its performance in climate policy. For example, investments in differentiating external fossil fuel providers rather than in boosting domestic production of renewables contradict the EU´s decarbonisation agenda. Moreover, adopting a geopolitical, and thus more confrontational approach in global energy policy (i.e., by reducing energy trade with perceived geopolitical competitors, by restricting the export of low-carbon technologies) has an impact on cooperation in the multilateral frameworks where global efforts to tackle climate change are discussed and agreed upon (cf. Bazilian et al., 2020).

Hence, the article investigates the following issues: To what extent and how did a geopolitical shift occur in EU energy policy between 2019 and 2023? What does a shift to geopolitical actorness imply for the EU's energy policy and low-carbon transition? The analysis begins with a conceptual discussion and definition of the "geopolitical approach" in energy policy, followed by a review of recent literature on energy geopolitics and the geopolitics of the energy transition. Then, it briefly outlines the methodology adopted in the article and the primary sources on which the study is based. The central part of the article presents the empirical analysis following a diachronic approach, which shows how the Commission's use of geopolitical rhetoric and policy focus has changed in its documents during the period under consideration. This is followed by a discussion of the (possible) implications of the Commission's geopolitical shift, particularly those concerning the EU's low-carbon transition.

2. Conceptualising and Studying Geopolitics in Energy Policy

2.1. Defining a Geopolitical Approach to Energy Policy

While von der Leyen provided a broad idea of what she meant by "geopolitical" in her inaugural speech as Commission president in November 2019, defining the term more precisely is useful to understand what it implies, particularly in terms of energy policy. At the most basic level, geopolitics refers to the interaction between geographic factors and foreign policy. A geopolitical analysis highlights the importance of natural endowments and economic resources in shaping the foreign policy of a state. Accordingly, geopolitical actorness involves the mobilisation of a country's natural resources and related infrastructure for the achievement of foreign policy goals (Kropatcheva, 2011, p. 555).

In energy policy, a geopolitical approach focuses on securing access to primary resources and technologies and on controlling their supply chain. It entails the adoption of foreign policy strategies that are functional to attaining these goals. Security of supply is the main objective and overshadows other traditional aspects of energy policy, such as sustainability and competitiveness. A geopolitical actor tends to focus on the pursuit of a political agenda, even if this involves sacrificing market or liberal principles; optimum market outcomes and economic considerations are subordinated to political calculations. Governments that follow a geopolitical logic treat energy as a strategic good and play a central role in planning external energy policy, as opposed to allowing private companies and market forces to determine its outcome. This involves the political, regulatory, and diplomatic backing of strategies aimed at controlling energy resources, usually to the detriment of other international actors (Siddi & Kustova, 2021, p. 1078).

For example, a geopolitical actor can support diplomatically and financially the construction of a pipeline that has limited economic rationale because it sees the project as advancing its geopolitical interests and countering those of its adversaries. Moreover, to advance its agenda and justify exceptional procedures or anti-economic energy projects, a geopolitical actor often relies on arguments focusing on security, which leads to the securitisation of energy policy (Heinrich & Szulecki, 2018). Securitisation is the discursive process through which an issue is constructed as an existential threat within a political community, and urgent and exceptional measures are called upon to address the supposed threat (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 491). In the context of energy policy, securitisation may involve the discursive construction of imports of fossil fuels or critical minerals from a certain country as a security threat, calling for quick policy responses to counter the menace. Hence, securitisation is closely correlated with a geopolitical approach; the adoption of such an approach is often the policy response to the discursive construction of a major threat.

On the other hand, geopolitical actorness can be invoked in response to rapidly changing geopolitical circumstances, when conflict suddenly trumps market logic and mutual economic benefits. In such a situation, a state is called upon to intervene and minimise risks by enabling access to alternative and reliable energy suppliers, or by implementing exceptional measures to curb energy consumption. This is arguably the context in which the EU found itself after Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022. In these circumstances, the shift to a geopolitical approach in the EU's external action accelerated, affecting also the intra-European discursive contestation. For instance, prior to 2022, EU policymakers attempted to square the perceived need for greater EU autonomy and sovereignty in the international arena with the export-driven (and import-dependent, in many areas) nature of the EU's economy. This attempt is reflected in the adoption of the term "open strategic autonomy" by the Commission's liberal actors, where the adjective "open" is meant to reiterate the EU's credentials as a free trader and an open economy and, thus, relativise the more protectionist-sounding "autonomy" (Gehrke, 2022, p. 62). However, understandings of "strategic autonomy" remained very diverse within the Union (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022, p. 17); as we shall see, the post-2022 geopolitical shift has led to an emphasis on decoupling from some key trade partners (China) and on reducing economic relations to a minimum with others (Russia).

A geopolitical approach largely contradicts a market liberal approach, where the state is only a rule provider and market forces determine the flow of energy. Following a market liberal approach, the European Green Deal and the energy transition can be sustained by international trade of low-carbon technology and by mutually beneficial multilateral cooperation. Conversely, geopolitical logic postulates competition between rival blocs, protectionism, and a focus on avoiding dependence on imports; cooperation can only take place within clubs of "like-minded" countries (Bazilian et al., 2020). Following this logic, the application of norms and standards in international energy markets is geared to geopolitical goals, such as fostering the pre-eminence of a particular country by having it dictate the rules to others. As the EU has long been described as a market liberal actor that relies on competitiveness and open markets in energy policy (see for instance Goldthau & Sitter, 2014), the adoption of a geopolitical posture implies a significant departure from earlier EU practice.

2.2. Energy Geopolitics and the Low-Carbon Transition: An Overview of Recent Scholarship

The article contributes to the burgeoning literature on energy geopolitics and the geopolitics of energy transition through a focus on how recent EU policy documents conceptualise central issues such as the geopolitics of hydrogen, critical minerals, and fossil fuels, as well as the development of the net-zero industry. The literature on the geopolitics of the energy transition is now extensive, hence comprehensive analytical reviews have attempted to systematise it. Drawing on recent literature, Vakulchuk et al. (2020) argued that renewable energy has many advantages over fossil fuels in terms of international security and peace, but exacerbates geopolitical tensions related to critical minerals and cybersecurity. Accordingly, Kalantzakos (2020) claimed that a "race for critical minerals"—rare earths, cobalt, and lithium, in particular)—is taking place among great powers, with China leading the competition. Overland et al. (2019) attempted to evaluate geopolitical gains and losses for individual states from the energy transition, whereas Bazilian et al. (2020) developed four scenarios for the transition, including geopolitical implications.

Comprehensive edited volumes were published, with both academic and policy-oriented angles of enquiry, analysing the consequences of the energy transition for individual countries and regions, as well as the geopolitical implications of the diffusion of low-carbon energy sources, carriers, and technology (see contributions in Hafner & Tagliapietra, 2020; and Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2021). In addition to critical minerals and rare earths, the geopolitics of hydrogen has received special attention. Van de Graaf et al. (2020, p. 1) have argued that hydrogen "has the potential to fundamentally redraw the geography of global energy trade, create a new class of energy exporters, and reshape geopolitical relations and alliances between countries." An extensive report published by the International Renewable Energy Agency (2022) and other studies (cf. Noussan et al., 2021) have shown that the hydrogen business will be more competitive and less lucrative than oil and gas and that it faces considerable technical challenges. However, these studies also highlight the geopolitical and economic

significance of hydrogen. This has important implications for the EU, which aims to drastically increase domestic hydrogen production and imports from abroad.

Another strand of research has examined prospects for the nuclear industry in the low-carbon transition. Especially after the disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in 2011, this debate has become more controversial and polarised, both in the EU and globally. Recent studies have highlighted high costs and long construction times for new plants, as well as technical and environmental issues (Markard et al., 2020). In the West, the nuclear sector has been in a long-term crisis, while Asian and especially Russian competitors have expanded their influence in global markets. Moreover, the levelized (long-term) cost of electricity from nuclear is higher than for most renewable sources (Rothwell, 2022). However, several EU members see nuclear power as central to their low-carbon energy mix, and the EU has included nuclear-related investments in its taxonomy for sustainable activities, meaning that nuclear projects can receive funding from the Union's sustainable finance package (Directorate-General for Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union, 2022).

Most of the literature on the geopolitics of the energy transition portrays the EU as a net beneficiary, arguing that the low-carbon transformation will allow the Union to overcome its long-standing dependence on fossil fuel suppliers and become a prosumer. However, large EU fossil fuel imports are expected to continue in the short and medium term, while new security issues are anticipated for the EU's supply of critical minerals and hydrogen. Kalantzakos et al. (2023) have argued that the EU has developed a distinct approach to the energy transition by pushing back against Sino-American bipolar geopolitics and by utilising its normative, economic, and regulatory power and strong networks of global institutional relations to maintain a competitive but working relationship with China. The article follows this strand of research by relying on recent empirical material to question whether the EU has indeed adopted such a distinct approach.

2.3. A Qualitative Analysis of EU Energy Policy Documents

The documents under consideration include the Commission's communications on the European Green Deal and the Critical Raw Materials Resilience, the EU Hydrogen Strategy, the Global Gateway, the REPowerEU Plan, the External Energy Strategy, the Solar Energy Strategy, and the Green Deal Industrial Plan (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023a). While the Commission also published other important documents within the context of the Green Deal, the focus here is on those that—based on an extensive review of such policy documents—we consider most relevant for the EU's external action. Examining them allows an investigation of whether the Commission's policymaking has really turned "geopolitical." As argued, an analysis of documents concerning the European Green Deal is particularly representative due to the wide reach of this policy field, which covers areas from energy to industrial strategy and external relations. The Green Deal and the energy transition have been central to the policy agenda of the von der Leyen Commission. Moreover, the period under consideration (2019–2023) is optimal to evaluate whether the Commission's rhetoric and policy priorities changed in response to the occurrence of multiple international crises with strong implications for energy policy—the Covid-19 pandemic, the global energy crunch and the subsequent rise in prices, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Arguably, the EU's turn to a geopolitical stance in energy policy, as well as in other policy areas, began before 2019. For instance, in 2016 the EU published its Global Strategy, which stated: "We live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat" (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 10). It also argued that "terrorism, hybrid threats, climate change, economic volatility and energy insecurity endanger our people and territory" (European External Action Service, 2016, pp. 18–19). A geopolitical shift in the EU's external energy policy could be detected as early as 2015, when, following Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Commission launched the Energy Union strategy. One of the main goals of the strategy was to reduce gas imports from Russia by diversifying suppliers (Siddi, 2016). However, this plan was hardly followed by any consequential policies, as shown by the fact that energy trade with Russia (as well as dependence on China-controlled supply chains for critical minerals and low-carbon technologies) continued and even increased in the late 2010s. At this stage, a clear and overt intent of becoming a "geopolitical actor" had not been formulated by the EU, or certainly not in the explicit terms used by von der Leyen in 2019. It is also for these reasons that the article focuses on the period between 2019–2023. While a comprehensive analysis of the EU's geopolitical shift in energy policy could start earlier than 2019, this would require a wider scope and, especially, a lengthier study than an individual article (for a more extensive *longue durée* investigation, see Siddi, 2023). On the other hand, a narrower focus on recent years complements earlier studies on EU actorness in external energy politics (cf. Goldthau & Sitter, 2014; McGowan, 2008) with new empirical material.

Scope limitations also explain why the article focuses solely on European Commission documents, and not on the texts produced by other key EU institutional actors, such as European Council conclusions. Indeed, the European Council has become more influential in numerous areas of EU policy-making, including energy (Bocquillon & Maltby, 2021; Thaler, 2016). Future studies could widen the scope to include an analysis of Council documents. However, Commission policy documents are often drafted in response to political guidance

from the Council. For example, in their Versailles declaration of 10–11 March 2022, EU heads of state and government explicitly invited the Commission to propose a REPowerEU Plan to phase out the Union's dependency on Russian fossil fuels as soon as possible (European Council, 2022, pp. 5–6). The declaration also identified several strategies to pursue this objective, which were duly examined and specified in the document presented by the Commission the following May. In this article, the focus is on an in-depth analysis of the usually longer and more technical texts produced by the Commission on energy policy. The final, published versions of these texts usually reflect the political guidelines of, or at least the prevailing discourses and power relations within the European Council. They are therefore a very good excerpt of the EU's (rather than just the Commission's) strategies in energy policy.

The documents are investigated through qualitative document analysis, with a focus on detecting terms, phrases, and arguments that point to a geopolitical approach. Qualitative document analysis is an empirically grounded methodology that is used to identify and analyse the presence, meaning, and relationships of certain words, concepts, or themes in a text (Bowen, 2009; Ercan & Marsh, 2016). It can be used to analyse documents such as foreign policy strategies, parliamentary transcripts, party manifestos, and political speeches. Qualitative document analysis allows an interpretive investigation of policy documents, which is enriched by the researcher's awareness of the background, political context, and goals of the documents (Wesley, 2014). Knowledge of the broader framework in which a political text is produced also enables a plausible interpretive analysis of causal relationships, for example, between political and societal developments and policy planning.

In this article, qualitative document analysis is applied to the exploration of EU official documents that are publicly available on the European Commission's website. The analysis specifically focuses on detecting terms and concepts that can indicate a geopolitical approach to energy policy. Most notably, these include semantic fields related to security (i.e., "security," "energy security," "security of supply"), geopolitical competition (terms or phrases identifying competitors or enemies that pose a threat to the self in energy policy), and security-driven cooperation (in the case of the EU, international energy partnerships that are driven primarily by security considerations rather than by economic factors). The identification of these semantic fields allows an interpretive analysis of whether and how EU energy policy planning has become geopolitical. The analysis focuses on policy planning, rather than policy practice. Assessing policy practice would require studying the implementation of the documents under investigation, which involves the collection of a vast and different array of data and, for some policies, would only be possible in a few years. Nonetheless, the exploration of planning documents and strategies gives us a clear sense of the direction that EU energy policy is taking and of the rationale that should guide future policy developments.

3. Detecting the "Geopolitical" in Commission Documents: From the Green Deal to the Industrial Plan

3.1. The External Dimension of the European Green Deal Communication

The European Green Deal can be conceptualised as a roadmap of policies for the EU's climate agenda (Siddi, 2020). These policies were first presented in a European Commission communication in December 2019, and thus before the Covid-19 pandemic and the rapid escalation in international tensions that followed Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022. They were later developed through strategic documents and legislative proposals. The focus here is on the Commission's communication from December 2019, particularly its aspects about external action, where a geopolitical stance will be detected if present.

The Green Deal communication emphasised multilateral cooperation in fora such as the UN, the G7, the G20, and the WTO, as well as partnerships with a diverse group of actors to tackle climate change (European Commission, 2020a, pp. 20–21). The document included an emphasis on supporting the ecological transition in the EU's immediate neighbours. This could be seen as entailing a geopolitical dimension, notably the attempt to expand EU influence in Eastern partnership countries and the Southern Mediterranean. However, China was also described as a partner, while green alliances were envisaged practically across the globe. Conversely, energy cooperation with the EU's main security partners, the US and NATO, was neither singled out nor mentioned explicitly. This suggests that the document conceptualised the Green Deal and the energy transition in terms of open and broad multilateral cooperation, rather than through the prism of security and geopolitics.

A geopolitical approach emerged in the declared intention to set EU standards that apply across global value chains, and arguably in plans to adjust trade policy to support the ecological transition. Most significantly, a carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM) was proposed to prevent carbon leakage (European Commission, 2020a, pp. 5, 21–22). CBAM has been criticised by many of the EU's trade partners as a form of "green protectionism" that advances the European economic and political agenda, rather than multilateral cooperation in the energy transition (Grimm et al., 2021). At the same time, the proposed measures on trade policy, promoting EU standards and CBAM can also be seen as an attempt of the EU to advance the energy transition, rather than (just) its geopolitical interests. Overall, the Green Deal communication reflected primarily a focus on broad and comprehensive multilateral cooperation for the energy transition, whereas geopolitical considerations played a secondary role.

3.2. The 2020 Strategies for Hydrogen and Critical Raw Materials

In the summer of 2020, the Commission published two policy documents that were highly relevant to the energy transition and had a clear international dimension: A Hydrogen Strategy for a Climate-Neutral Europe and Critical Raw Materials Resilience: Charting a Path Towards Greater Security and Sustainability (European Commission, 2020b, 2020c).

The hydrogen strategy highlighted the importance of hydrogen as a vector for renewable energy storage, alongside batteries, and for transport. The main focus of the document was on trade and investments to create a European Clean Hydrogen Alliance, as well as on technical aspects such as transportation (building new infrastructure, repurposing gas pipelines), use, and further development of hydrogen. The last section of the strategy, focusing on the international dimension, argued that "taking into account natural resources, physical interconnections and technological development, the Eastern Neighbourhood, in particular Ukraine, and the Southern Neighbourhood countries should be priority partners" (European Commission, 2020c, p. 19). In addition, it stated that the EU should strengthen its international leadership for "technical standards, regulations and definitions on hydrogen" and "facilitate the development of a structured international hydrogen market in euro" (European Commission, 2020c, pp. 21, 23). However, broader cooperation was also envisaged, for instance with the African Union. The focus on neighbouring countries can be at least partly explained by the nature of hydrogen markets, which tend to be regional due to transportation challenges. Overall, geopolitical considerations were present in the strategy, such as the prioritisation of cooperation with specific geographic areas and the call for achieving technological and regulatory leadership. Nonetheless, economic, technical, and climate considerations played a more central role in the document.

On the other hand, security, resilience, and open strategic autonomy were at the forefront of the CRM communication. The document presented the EU's 2020 list of CRM, the challenges to the security of supply, and actions to increase resilience. Sustainability was also mentioned, but much greater emphasis was placed on security. Geopolitical factors were mentioned explicitly in the context of preparing for future supply challenges: "The geopolitical aspect should also play an integral part in foresight, enabling Europe to anticipate and address future needs" (European Commission, 2020c, p. 4). The communication highlighted that the extraction of CRM is highly concentrated in a few countries (for example, rare earths in China, borates in Turkey, and platinum in South Africa); accordingly, the EU should strengthen domestic sourcing, recycling and processing, and diversify imports from third countries (European Commission, 2020c, pp. 3, 6–8). Moreover, the document recommended the creation of strategic partnerships with resource-rich third countries. However, the stated range of possible partners was broad, and not limited to the EU's allies in the field of security and defence. For instance, the document mentioned "bilateral raw materials dialogues with a range of countries, including China" (European Commission, 2020c, p. 15). Cooperation in multilateral fora such as the UN, the G20, and the WTO was also stressed. Therefore, while geopolitical logic was present in the CRM communication, reflecting the EU's high level of dependence on this sector, a diverse spectrum of partnerships and dialogues were identified as possible solutions. A focus on broad multilateral cooperation coexisted with, and arguably prevailed over confrontational arguments driven by geopolitical factors.

3.3. From the Global Gateway to the REPowerEU Plan: The Commission's Geopolitical Turning Point

The Global Gateway was the Commission's last major policy document concerning, inter alia, the green transition that was published before Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022. Largely a response to China's Belt and Road Initiative and the EU's waning influence on the international stage, the Global Gateway reflected growing strategic competition by calling for a "concerted effort with like-minded partners," particularly the US and the G7 (European Commission, 2021, p. 2). At the same time, it mentioned comprehensive "connectivity partnerships" with Japan and India; economic and investment plans in Western Balkan; Eastern partnership and Southern Neighbourhood countries; and EU–Africa green partnerships (European Commission, 2021, pp. 2, 6). The main objective of the Gateway was that of building new, resilient, and sustainable connectivity infrastructure after the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The goal of strengthening the resilience of supply chains recurs several times in the document. Taking into account the Global Gateway's framing as a response to the Belt and Road Initiative, this also implied reducing dependence on China-controlled supply chains, even if China was not explicitly addressed in the document (however, this framing is prominent in speeches of EU top policymakers and the broader policy debate; see for instance Borrell, 2022; Lau & Moens, 2022).

Conversely, the REPowerEU plan—released in May 2022—was explicit about its geopolitical goals. The document stated that "REPowerEU is about rapidly reducing our dependence on Russian fossil fuels" (European Commission, 2022a, p. 1). This was to be achieved by saving energy and accelerating the green energy transition, but also by diversifying supplies of fossil fuels. As opposed to the documents analysed earlier, the REPowerEU plan was not exclusively focused on the green transition. The centrality of geopolitical considerations after Russia's attack on Ukraine paved the way

for substantial derogations from the green agenda, such as "investments estimated at EUR 10bn" which would enable the EU "to import sufficient liquefied natural gas (LNG) and pipeline gas from other suppliers," as well as to build new infrastructure to interconnect the domestic EU gas markets (European Commission, 2022a, p. 13). Considerations about security, and specifically the security of energy supply often recurred in the document.

The REPowerEU plan also cited the changed geopolitical landscape as the main reason (together with climate change) for accelerating the energy transition by boosting renewable energy production and deploying the necessary technology. This logic also emerged in one of the Commission's documents focused on renewables that accompanied the REPowerEU plan, the EU Solar Energy Strategy. The strategy began by stating that solar energy will be the "kingpin" of the EU's efforts to end dependency on Russian fossil fuels (European Commission, 2022b, p. 1). Moreover, it highlighted the "marginal EU contribution in the manufacturing and assembly stages of the [solar photovoltaic] supply chain, combined with the quasi-monopolistic role of one country"—a clear reference to China—which "diminishes the EU's resilience in case of extensive external supply disruptions" (European Commission, 2022b, p. 18). China's leadership in solar power technology was framed as a threat to the EU, which highlights the strong penetration of geopolitical logic in (green) energy policy planning by mid-2022. The strategy advocated international cooperation on solar power with neighbouring countries, India, the US, Africa and, through the International Renewable Energy Agency, other global contexts.

Furthermore, the REPowerEU plan argued in favour of using the EU's market power to obtain better conditions in global energy trade, for instance by aggregating EU purchases of gas, LNG, and hydrogen through an EU Energy Platform (European Commission, 2022a, p. 4). Other measures with clear geopolitical significance were the emergency synchronisation of the Moldovan and Ukrainian electricity grids with the EU's grid and the planning of three major hydrogen import corridors via the Mediterranean, the North Sea area, and "as soon as conditions allow, with Ukraine" (European Commission, 2022a, pp. 5, 7). While the former aimed at diminishing Russia's leverage over Moldova and Ukraine, the latter served the purpose of phasing out EU energy imports from Russia; both were functional in strengthening the EU's geopolitical influence in its neighbourhood.

3.4. The EU's 2022 External Energy Strategy

The Commission's communication EU External Energy Engagement in a Changing World, published simultaneously with the REPowerEU plan, is a prime source for assessing the EU's geopolitical shift in energy policy. The strategy attempted to combine geopolitical and climate-related arguments; however, a close reading of the text shows that energy security and geopolitical considerations were prioritised. The strategy stated that the green energy transition is the only way to tackle climate change and reduce dependence on Russia. Diversification of fossil fuel imports is the first issue discussed in the document, which states that "the EU must increase its gas imports from non-Russia sources" by 50 additional billion cubic metres of LNG and 10 billion cubic metres of pipeline gas per year (European Commission, 2022c, p. 3). This gas was expected to arrive primarily from the US, Norway, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Canada, and Qatar. Therefore, the Commission hoped to obtain gas from Western allies, a few neighbouring states, and countries that it perceived as reliable suppliers. Security considerations, rather than economic and open market logic, drove the Commission's stance.

Geopolitical factors also shaped the following part of the document concerning hydrogen imports. In this regard, the Southern Mediterranean region and Africa were seen as the main potential suppliers. Moreover, the document advocated reducing dependency on other Russian energy imports beyond oil and gas, most notably nuclear fuel. A whole section of the strategy was devoted to "supporting partners impacted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine"—including Moldova, Georgia, and the Western Balkans—through reverse flows of gas, the provision of energy equipment and common purchases of gas (European Commission, 2022c, pp. 6–7, 10–11).

The section of the strategy on accelerating the green transition proposed several global partnerships to boost renewable energy production and energy efficiency, as well as cooperation on research and technology, but also returned to the topic of ensuring access to CRM through cooperation with Western states and resource-rich countries in the Global South (European Commission, 2022c, pp. 11–17). The last section, titled "Laying the Foundations of the New Global Energy System," was explicit about the geopolitical logic driving the strategy. It stated that "the EU will continue to work in tandem with the US, with whom priorities are well aligned across the full energy policy spectrum," as well as with "partners like Norway, Japan, Australia, Chile, United Kingdom and others" (European Commission, 2022c, pp. 17–18). Significantly, it concluded by stating that the energy transition "can support the EU in achieving its broader geopolitical objectives to reinforce resilience and open strategic autonomy" (European Commission, 2022c, p. 19).

3.5. The Green Deal Industrial Plan: Net-Zero Industry and Critical Raw Materials

In February 2023, the European Commission published the communication A Green Deal Industrial Plan for the Net-Zero Age. The plan intended to make the EU "a leading player in the net-zero industries of the future" by underpinning industrial manufacturing of key technologies in the Union (European Commission, 2023a, p. 2). A simplified regulatory framework, a faster permitting

process for strategic projects and quicker access to funding are essential goals of the plan. The document argued that third actors' subsidies were "unleveling the playing field," and hence the Commission intended to relax rules on state aid through the Temporary Crisis and Transition Framework. Based on this proposal, state aid could be granted to all renewable technologies, green hydrogen, and biofuel storage projects (European Commission, 2023a, pp. 7–10). Allowing substantial state intervention, notably through the direct provision of financial aid, was a significant derogation from the EU's long-standing approach that prioritised market competition in energy policy. Such an influential role for the state in policy planning and implementation reflects a geopolitical approach to energy markets—particularly as it was invoked to counter the practices of third countries.

In March, two draft legal acts detailed the substance of the Industrial Plan. The Net-Zero Industry Act proposed that the EU's manufacturing capacity of strategic net-zero technologies should reach at least 40% of the Union's deployment needs by 2030 (European Commission, 2023b). Such technologies include solar photovoltaic, onshore and offshore wind, geothermal energy, batteries, heat pumps, electrolysers, carbon capture and storage, sustainable alternative fuels, biogas, grid technologies, and advanced nuclear power technologies. Moreover, the Critical Raw Materials Act set benchmarks for domestic EU production capacity along the supply chain of CRM: at least 10% of the EU's annual consumption for extraction, 40% for processing, and 15% for recycling (European Commission, 2023c). Supply diversification measures were also included: Not more than 65% of the EU's annual consumption of each strategic CRM at any stage of processing can come from a single third country. This was an ambitious target given that the EU is currently over 95% dependent on foreign supplies for 17 out of 27 CRMs. China would be impacted heavily by these targets as it is a key CRM supplier to the EU and has more than an 80% share of the European market across the solar industry supply chain (Menkhoff & Zeevaert, 2022). Taken together, the Net-Zero Industry Act and the Critical Raw Materials Act aimed primarily at strengthening the EU's resilience and position vis-à-vis other major powers, particularly China, in a critical field for the energy transition. Geopolitical competition and China's potential disruption of relevant supply chains provided the logical foundations for both documents.

Overall, the Industrial Plan was intrinsically driven by security and geopolitical considerations. It stated that "at the time of rising geopolitical tensions, the EU and its member states should act together to defend their interests" (European Commission, 2023a, p. 19). By supporting the domestic extraction of CRMs and the manufacturing of green technologies, including through state aid, the Commission tried to strengthen the EU's position vis-à-vis geopolitical competitors. To achieve this goal, the Commission planned to deploy the EU's regulatory power. For instance, the Industrial Plan stated that the EU will continue to make use of trade defence instruments and of the Regulation on Foreign Subsidies, introduced in January 2023 to investigate subsidies granted by third countries. Furthermore, it argued for using the EU framework for screening foreign direct investments "to safeguard key European assets and protect collective security" (European Commission, 2023a, p. 19) and for deploying the International Procurement Instrument to support EU companies in accessing procurement markets in third countries.

4. Conclusions

This article has shown that the EU's policies for a green energy transition have taken a decisive geopolitical turn following the Covid-19 crisis and particularly Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022. While geopolitical logic was partly detectable in earlier documents published by the von der Leyen Commission, the shift in language and policy goals has accelerated since 2022. To this end, in energy policy planning, the Commission has been consistent with von der Leyen's proclaimed intent of leading a "geopolitical Commission." As the EU polycrisis shows no signs of abating—with further military escalation in the Russia–Ukraine war and growing tensions between China and the West—the EU's shift to a geopolitical approach in energy policy will likely continue in the foreseeable future.

This also has implications for Europe's green transition. The Commission has tried to reconcile its geopolitical turn with the Green Deal, but contradictions have become evident. As fully phasing out fossil fuel dependence is impossible in the short term, large new investments must be made in infrastructure to import gas from countries that are not perceived as geopolitical competitors. This increases the risk of carbon lock-in and of distracting resources from the green transition. Hence, EU policy responses to the polycrisis may end up delaying the transition.

Meanwhile, the EU's focus on securing access to CRM and to green hydrogen production in the Global South runs the risk of eliciting a negative response from some countries, where the EU's new external energy policy could perpetuate disadvantageous trade patterns. For instance, recent policies in Morocco and Egypt signal a focus on domestic green industrialisation, rather than on supplying resources and renewable energy for decarbonisation in Europe. To avoid accusations of "green colonialism," the EU needs to develop partnerships aimed at decarbonisation and socio-economic development in partner countries too (Quitzow et al., 2022).

Furthermore, easing regulations for mining CRM in Europe can impact negatively biodiversity, especially as most of the EU's known reserves are in or near protected areas. Environmental campaigners argue that mining projects can cause water and soil pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. At the same time, offshoring mining would only transfer the ecological consequences

to other contexts, notably the Global South, where environmental regulation tends to be laxer.

Meanwhile, in the business sector, responses to recent EU policies like the Industrial Plan have been mixed. While the battery industry has welcomed plans to support domestic production, stakeholders in the solar industry worry that local content sourcing will have a strong impact on prices and competitiveness (Yang et al., 2023). The EU's energy transition policies will have to navigate these challenges and carefully ponder the trade-off between geopolitical considerations and the climate agenda. The "geopolitical" turn in the Commission's energy policy cannot always be reconciled with climate policy priorities and could hinder the multilateral cooperation that is necessary to drive the energy transition and tackle climate change.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Marco Siddi is a senior research fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) in Helsinki and Montalcini assistant professor at the University of Cagliari, Italy. He leads the project The Global Politics of the Energy Transition at FIIA.

Federica Prandin is a PhD candidate at the University of Helsinki and sustainability programme manager and research fellow at GLOBSEC, Bratislava.