Geopolitics, Power, Space and Resources in the Quest for Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the interrelationship between intensifying geopolitical competition and the global pursuit of sustainable development in the twenty-first century. The key objectives are to analyse how geopolitical dynamics shape and constrain sustainable development, to explore the interaction between power, spatial contestation, and resource competition, and to assess their implications for achieving global development goals. The study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology, drawing on critical geopolitics, political ecology, international relations theory, and development studies, supported by comparative case studies and the use of statistical and environmental performance data. The findings demonstrate that geopolitical competition significantly influences development outcomes through three main dimensions: the distribution of power in the international system, the governance and contestation of geographic space, and competition over natural resources such as fossil fuels, critical minerals, and freshwater. Case studies reveal stark inequalities between developed and developing countries, showing how structural power imbalances hinder equitable progress toward sustainable development. The study also finds that traditional geopolitical approaches often undermine cooperative frameworks necessary for sustainability, while alternative perspectives rooted in critical and environmental geopolitics provide pathways for more collaborative and inclusive governance. The paper concludes that sustainable development and geopolitics are fundamentally interconnected and must be analysed within a unified framework. It proposes a reconceptualised "green geopolitics" that integrates power, ecological sustainability, and global cooperation, offering important implications for policy, theory, and the future of global governance.

Keywords: geopolitics; critical geopolitics; power; space; natural resources; sustainable development; SDGs; political ecology; energy transition; Global South; civil society; regional institutions; comparative governance

INTRODUCTION

Few analytical challenges in modern-day international studies are more critical, more conceptually challenging, than that between geopolitics and sustainable development. On the surface, these seem like different areas of inquiry: geopolitics is concerned with the ways in which geographic factors, spatial arrangements and material resources shape the distribution and exercise of political power between and within states; and sustainable development is concerned with the economic, social and ecological conditions that enable human wellbeing across and within generations. In practice these domains are intimately and inextricably intertwined. The competition for power, the contestation of space, and the struggle for access to resources which are the fundamental dynamics of geopolitical life — are at the same time the structural conditions under which sustainable development must be sought. Understanding this relationship its tensions as well as its sometimes fruitful possibilities is important to scholars and practitioners who are committed to struggling for the emergence of a more equitable and ecologically sustainable world order.

The pertinence of this enquiry has grown considerably in the years that have passed since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015. The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are a manifestation of a global commitment to end poverty, reduce inequality, combat climate change,

protect biodiversity, and ensure equality of basic services, were intended to be universal in their application and transformative in ambition (United Nations, 2022). Yet the institutional and political climate in which these goals must be reached has become substantially more difficult. The resumption of great-power competition between the United States and China has complicated multilateral cooperation; the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 destabilised global energy and food markets with outsized, disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable populations; climate change has intensified resource scarcity and territorial disputes; and the rising tide of resource nationalism has complicated the international cooperation needed for a just and rapid energy transition (Flint, 2022; Klare, 2019; Scholte et al., 2021). These are not marginal complications to the sustainable development agenda they are structural features of the geopolitical environment that fundamentally determine what is possible, how fast, and for whom.

This article makes three related arguments. First, it asserts that asymmetries of geopolitical power including the structural advantages possessed by dominant states in international economic and institutional governance systematically constrain the developmental options available to states in the Global South, engendering a condition of dependent development that is inconsistent with the equity dimensions of sustainable development. Second, it argues that the contestation of geographic space including territorial disputes, the governance of global commons, and the increasingly contentious politics of climate-related territorial change creates security environments and governance failures that stand in direct contradiction to sustainable development. Third, it argues that resource competition both in its classical fossil fuel dimensions and its increasingly consequential critical minerals dimensions creates distributional conflicts and governance gaps that cannot be resolved within the framework of classical geopolitical reasoning.

To animate these analytical arguments, the article draws on detailed case studies from diverse regional contexts including sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, the Arctic, and Latin America and compares governance experiences across developed and developing country settings. Statistical data and environmental indicators are integrated throughout to ground theoretical claims in measurable terms. A dedicated section addresses the roles of regional institutions, civil society organisations, and local communities as critical actors in the promotion of sustainable resource governance, actors whose importance has been systematically undervalued in mainstream geopolitical analysis.

The article synthesises scholarship from four intellectual traditions: critical geopolitics, environmental geopolitics, political ecology, and critical development studies. This multi-disciplinary approach reflects the conviction that the problems at the intersection of geopolitics and sustainable development exceed the analytical capacity of any single disciplinary tradition and require the integration of political, geographic, ecological, and economic analysis into a coherent interpretive framework. The article is organised through nine sections, proceeding from theoretical foundations through empirical analysis of power, space, and resources, through an examination of civil society and regional institutional dynamics, toward analytical and normative conclusions.

From Classical to Critical Geopolitics: Theoretical Evolution

Geopolitics as an organised intellectual tradition evolved in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the context of European imperialism and within the intellectual currents of social Darwinism, environmental determinism, and strategic realism. The founding contributions of Halford Mackinder — who in 1904 provided the concept of the Heartland as the geographical pivot of world history — and Friedrich Ratzel, whose concept of Lebensraum provided the vocabulary for territorial expansionism, built a framework in which the physical features of the earth were understood to structure constraints on political possibility, channelling state behaviour toward territorial aggrandisement and resource accumulation (Flint, 2022). Alfred Thayer Mahan's theorisation of sea power, and Nicholas Spykman's reformulation of Mackinder's thesis in terms of the rimland, completed the classical geopolitical canon: a body of strategic thinking in which geographic location, territorial control, and resource access were the central determinants of state power and international order.

Classical geopolitics, for all its intellectual cogency, rested on assumptions now subject to comprehensive challenge. Its geographic determinism naturalised political arrangements that were in reality historically produced and socially contested. Its preoccupation with state competition and territorial expansion marginalised questions of distributive justice, ecological sustainability, and the rights of non-state actors. And its self-

presentation as the neutral ground of inter-state competition obscured the ways in which geographical knowledge is itself politically produced, serving the interests of dominant actors and legitimising particular configurations of power (O'Tuathail, 1996, as cited in Dalby, 2020; Muller, 2019). The critical geopolitics movement emerging from the work of Gearóid Ó Tuathail, John Agnew, and Simon Dalby in the 1990s sought to overcome these limitations by relocating geopolitical discourse from the objective description of geographic reality to a site of political contestation. Within such a framework, the designation of particular regions as strategic, peripheral, or threatening is not a neutral geographical description but a political act of representation that determines how regions are governed, who bears the costs of that governance, and whose development aspirations are recognised as legitimate (Dalby, 2020; Muller, 2019).

The emergence of environmental geopolitics or, to adopt Dalby's (2020) useful term, the 'geopolitics of the Anthropocene' represents a particularly productive extension of critical geopolitical analysis. Within the Anthropocene framework, the traditional geopolitical preoccupation with bounded territorial spaces and interstate competition is radically complicated by the recognition that human economic activity has produced planetary-scale ecological modifications anthropogenic climate change, mass extinction, ocean acidification, and the disruption of nitrogen and phosphorus cycles that cannot be governed within the territorially fragmented framework of the Westphalian state system. The atmosphere, the ocean, and the global biosphere are commons whose stability is a precondition for all forms of human development, yet these commons are governed, or rather systematically mismanaged, through institutions expressing the power asymmetries and competitive logics of classical geopolitics rather than the collective ecological imperatives of the Anthropocene (Dalby, 2020; Burchill et al., 2022).

Complementary theoretical resources are provided by political ecology, a tradition of scholarship that explores the relationships among political economy, ecological processes, and social power in the governance of natural environments (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020). Political ecology attends to the ways in which resource extraction, land use change, and environmental governance generate and reproduce social inequalities, producing distributional conflicts that are obscured by classical geopolitics and conventional development economics. The concept of accumulation by dispossession, developed by Harvey (2004) and applied by subsequent scholars to resource extraction in the Global South, is a particularly important analytical tool for understanding how geopolitical resource competition translates into local developmental and ecological harm — dislodging communities from land, water, and biodiversity on which their livelihoods depend in order to provide the raw materials that fuel global economic growth and sustain the power of dominant states and corporations (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; Hickel, 2021). Postcolonial geopolitics further contributes to this framework by accounting for the historical specificities of how colonial territorial arrangements, regimes of resource extraction, and governance institutions continue to shape the geopolitical constraints encountered by developing countries today.

The Geopolitics of Power

Structural Power, Hegemony, and Development Finance

Power in its multiple and overlapping forms is the central preoccupation of geopolitical analysis, and the distribution of power in the international system has direct and often determining consequences for the prospects of sustainable development. Classical realist geopolitics privileged military power as the ultimate currency of interstate relations. While military power remains significant, as evidenced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, the forms of power that matter most to sustainable development are predominantly non-military: structural power over the rules and institutions of global economic governance; technological power in the form of innovation leadership and intellectual property control; and financial power the ability to direct development capital, shape conditionality frameworks, and determine the terms on which states access international credit markets (Gallagher & Kozul-Wright, 2022).

Structural power, in Susan Strange's formulation, is the power to shape the frameworks within which other actors must operate, rather than simply to coerce other actors within existing arrangements. Applied to sustainable development, structural power analysis reveals how the architecture of global economic governance the IMF, World Bank, World Trade Organisation, and the complex of bilateral investment treaties and trade agreements reflects and reproduces the interests of the advanced industrial economies that designed these institutions in the

post-Second World War period (Gallagher & Kozul-Wright, 2022). The conditionality frameworks attached to IMF structural adjustment programmes and World Bank development lending have historically foregrounded fiscal consolidation, trade liberalisation, and private sector primacy at the expense of social protection, ecological management, and productive diversification. The intellectual property regimes enshrined in WTO agreements constrain developing country access to the clean technologies required for low-carbon development pathways. Agricultural subsidy structures maintained by the European Union and the United States systematically disadvantage smallholder farmers in developing economies, undermining food security and rural livelihoods in direct contradiction of the SDG commitments held by those same governments (Hickel, 2021; Gallagher & Kozul-Wright, 2022).

Global climate finance mobilised (2022)	USD ~89.6 billion — still below the $100B Copenhagen pledge
Developing country share of IFI voting rights	Under-represented relative to economic size and population share
Technology transfer mechanisms (SDG 17)	No binding multilateral framework operational as of 2024
Sovereign debt servicing costs (sub-Saharan Africa)	Average 18–20% of government revenues directed to debt service
Clean tech patent ownership	Over 80% held by G7 economies and China (IRENA, 2023)

Case Study: Norway vs. Nigeria: Divergent Governance of Oil Wealth

Norway and Nigeria both experienced major oil discoveries Norway in the North Sea (1969) and Nigeria in the Niger Delta (1956) yet their developmental trajectories diverged radically. Norway established the Government Pension Fund Global in 1990, now exceeding USD 1.7 trillion, governed by transparent fiscal rules that reinvest petroleum revenues into sovereign wealth for future generations. Rigorous environmental regulations, domestic content requirements, and robust anti-corruption frameworks ensured that oil wealth translated into broad-based social welfare, low inequality (Gini coefficient ~0.26), and high human development index rankings.

Nigeria, by contrast, has earned an estimated USD 1 trillion in oil revenues since independence, yet remains among the poorest countries globally, with over 40% of its population living in multidimensional poverty (UNDP, 2023). Structural factors including colonial resource extraction legacies, elite capture, weak institutions, and IMF-mandated subsidy removal have reproduced what scholars term the 'resource curse': a paradox in which resource abundance generates fiscal dependence, governance fragility, and developmental stagnation. The Niger Delta, source of Nigeria's oil wealth, remains one of the most environmentally degraded regions in the world, with over 40 years of oil spills documented by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP, 2011).

This comparison illustrates how geopolitical power structures including access to international capital markets, technological capacity, and institutional autonomy mediate the developmental outcomes of resource wealth far more than resource endowment itself. It also underscores the critical importance of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) as preconditions for the resource governance that SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) requires.

Great-Power Competition and the Multilateral Order

The intensification of great-power competition between the United States and China has added a new and complicating dimension to the geopolitics of power as it bears on sustainable development. China's emergence as a global development finance actor most dramatically expressed through the Belt and Road Initiative, which has channelled over USD 1 trillion in infrastructure investment to more than 140 countries has disrupted the post-Cold War pattern of Western-dominated development finance and opened new alternatives for developing country governments seeking options beyond the conditionality-laden financing of Bretton Woods institutions (Flint, 2022). However, the BRI has also generated geopolitical dependency dynamics, created substantial debt

obligations in recipient countries, and in many instances reproduced extractive development models that prioritise Chinese geopolitical and economic interests over the long-term developmental and ecological needs of recipient countries (Rolland, 2019, as cited in Flint, 2022).

The framing of Sino-American competition in increasingly zero-sum terms reflected in US CHIP legislation limiting semiconductor exports, the securitisation of critical mineral supply chains, and the competitive framing of green industrial policy through the Inflation Reduction Act has further complicated the cooperative multilateralism that sustainable development governance requires (Scholte et al., 2021). These dynamics extend beyond the headlines of superpower rivalry to encompass the broader structure of North-South relations. The ongoing underrepresentation of developing countries in IFI governance structures, the persistent insufficiency of climate finance pledges, and the systematic failure to deliver technology transfer provisions embedded in multilateral environmental agreements all illustrate how structural power reproduces arrangements that serve dominant states while imposing disproportionate costs on those least responsible for the problems sustainable development must address (Okereke, 2021; Hickel, 2021).

Dimension	Developed Countries (Global North)	Developing Countries (Global South)
IFI Voting Rights	Weighted majority; control key institutional decisions	Structurally underrepresented; limited agenda-setting power
Climate Finance	Pledge-makers; USD 100B target repeatedly missed	Pledge-recipients; climate finance needs vastly exceed flows
Technology Access	Lead patent holders; set licensing terms	Dependent on technology transfer; IP regimes limit access
Debt Architecture	Investment-grade credit; low borrowing costs	Junk-rated debt; high risk premiums drain developmental budgets
Green Industrial Policy	IRA, EU Green Deal: subsidise domestic industry	Limited fiscal space; compete for FDI on unfavourable terms

SDG Linkages

SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities): Power asymmetries in global governance perpetuate North-South structural inequalities, directly undermining SDG 10 targets on international financial architecture reform.

SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals): Great-power competition fragments multilateral cooperation precisely when SDG 17's call for technology transfer, climate finance, and policy coherence demands it most.

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions): The erosion of rules-based multilateralism weakens the institutional environments that SDG 16 seeks to build.

The Geopolitics of Space

Territorial Sovereignty and Its Ecological Limits

Space, as a geopolitical category, encompasses both the physical territory over which states claim and exercise sovereign authority, and the broader spatial frameworks through which human activity is organised, regulated, and contested. The relationship between the geopolitics of space and sustainable development operates across multiple scales from the micro-scale of community land rights and local ecological governance to the macro-scale of territorial conflict between states and the governance architecture of planetary commons.

At the most fundamental level, the Westphalian principle of territorial sovereignty organises the basic conditions under which sustainable development must be pursued. This principle has been instrumental in establishing the

right of states and developed states in particular to determine their own developmental trajectories without external interference, as articulated in the doctrine of permanent sovereignty over natural resources (United Nations, 2022). However, territorial sovereignty is also a source of structural tension with ecological sustainability in at least two analytically discrete ways. First, the imperative of national economic development creates pressures for resource extraction and land use intensification that frequently conflict with ecological limits imposed by global biospheric systems. The logic of territorial sovereignty creates an incentive for states to internalise the economic benefits of resource exploitation while externalising ecological costs onto shared atmospheric, oceanic, and hydrological systems — collective goods that lie beyond the regulatory reach of any single sovereign authority (Dalby, 2020; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020). Second, territorial conflicts between states over contested boundaries, adjacent resource zones, and strategic waterways divert resources from developmental priorities and generate humanitarian crises that reverse decades of accumulated development gains.

Countries with contested maritime boundaries (2023)	Over 100 active maritime boundary disputes globally
Global protected area coverage (land)	~17% of land surface — well below 30% target of Kunming-Montreal Framework
Transboundary river basins	276 internationally shared river basins covering ~60% of global freshwater flow
Climate displacement (2022)	Approximately 21.5 million people displaced by weather-related events (UNHCR)
Arctic ice loss rate	~13% reduction per decade since satellite records began (NASA, 2023)

Maritime Space and the Governance of Global Commons

The governance of maritime space is among the most consequential and contested dimensions of contemporary geopolitical rivalry, with far-reaching implications for sustainable development. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), entering into force in 1994, established a framework for maritime jurisdiction including exclusive economic zones of 200 nautical miles from coastal baselines within which states hold sovereign rights over marine resources. The UNCLOS framework has proved both an outstanding governance achievement and an enduring source of geopolitical tension, as competing states advance overlapping jurisdictional claims over strategically and economically valuable maritime zones. China's expansive claims over the South China Sea contested by Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan, and rejected by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016 represent the most prominent example of contemporary maritime geopolitical rivalry, but disputes over Arctic maritime boundaries, East China Sea demarcation, and West African offshore zones illustrate the continuance of territorial competition as a structural feature of contemporary geopolitics (Flint, 2022; Okereke, 2021).

The Arctic is emerging as a particularly consequential new geopolitical space. As climate change reduces sea ice coverage at rates of approximately 13% per decade (NASA, 2023), the region is becoming the site of intensifying competition among Russia, the United States, Canada, Norway, and China — which has designated itself a 'near-Arctic state'. The developmental implications of Arctic geopolitical competition — for indigenous communities, for the global climate system which depends on polar ice as a key component of planetary albedo regulation, and for the environmental integrity of Arctic marine ecosystems testify to the direct link between spatial geopolitics and planetary sustainability outcomes (Dalby, 2020; Klare, 2019).

Case Study: The South China Sea: Geopolitical Competition and Marine Ecosystem Governance

The South China Sea, through which approximately USD 3–5 trillion in global trade transits annually, sits at the intersection of some of the world's most consequential geopolitical tensions and some of its most ecologically significant marine environments. The sea encompasses the Coral Triangle the global centre of marine biodiversity and provides food security for an estimated 3.7 billion people who depend on fish as their primary protein source across the wider Asia-Pacific region.

China's island-building programme in the Spratly and Paracel Islands, covering approximately 3,200 acres of reclaimed land since 2013, has been accompanied by extensive coral reef destruction and has severely disrupted the marine ecosystems upon which coastal fishing communities across the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia depend. The UN Environment Programme has estimated that South China Sea reef destruction threatens the livelihoods of between 100,000 and 200,000 small-scale fishers directly. Militarisation of the contested zone has also restricted Vietnamese and Filipino fishing fleets from traditional fishing grounds, generating food insecurity that disproportionately affects low-income coastal communities.

The case illustrates the intersection of SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions): geopolitical territorial competition directly undermines marine ecosystem governance, with the heaviest developmental costs borne not by the competing great powers but by the fishing communities of smaller regional states whose food sovereignty and livelihoods depend on the stable governance of a shared maritime commons.

SDG Linkages

SDG 14 (Life Below Water): Contested maritime governance and illegal fishing undermine the SDG 14 targets on marine conservation and sustainable fisheries management.

SDG 13 (Climate Action): The atmosphere as a global common is undermined by the same territorial fragmentation that impedes effective multilateral climate governance.

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions): Maritime territorial disputes generate security environments that crowd out governance attention from developmental priorities.

The Geopolitics of Resources

Fossil Fuels and the Contested Energy Transition

Resources understood as the material inputs to economic and political power have always been central to geopolitical analysis, but the particular configuration of resource competition characterizing the contemporary moment is unprecedented in several important respects. The intersection of three great resource dynamics the managed decline of fossil fuel economies under the pressure of decarbonisation, intensifying competition for critical minerals essential to clean energy and digital technologies, and the impending scarcity and geopolitical salience of freshwater creates a resource geopolitical environment of particular complexity and consequence for sustainable development.

The geopolitics of fossil fuel energy that structured much of twentieth century international politics is undergoing a fundamental transformation driven by the imperative of climate stabilisation and the rapid cost decline in renewable energy technologies. This transformation is geopolitically consequential in unevenly distributed ways. For nations in the Global North, the shift away from fossil fuels provides both energy security benefits and industrial growth advantages in green manufacturing. For states heavily reliant on fossil fuel exports particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America the energy transition presents acute developmental challenges, risking the stranding of physical assets and human capital at precisely the moment when sustained investment in education, healthcare, and economic diversification is most urgently needed (Klare, 2019; Hickel, 2021). The geopolitical dimension of this asymmetry is compounded by the fact that the pace, direction, and institutional framework of the energy transition are predominantly determined by policy decisions and technological trajectories in the Global North, over which fossil fuel-dependent developing economies have minimal influence reproducing in a new register the structural dependency relationships that have characterised North-South economic relations throughout the post-colonial period.

Case Study: Bolivia's Lithium Nationalisation: Resource Sovereignty and the Energy Transition

Bolivia possesses the world's largest estimated lithium reserves, concentrated in the Salar de Uyuni salt flat — a resource whose value has grown exponentially as global demand for electric vehicle batteries surges. Bolivia's 2023 decision to nationalise its lithium resources through a state enterprise, Yacimientos de Litio Bolivianos

(YLB), and to pursue domestic processing and battery manufacturing rather than raw ore export, represents a deliberate attempt to break the extractive colonial pattern in which mineral-rich developing countries export raw commodities and import high-value processed goods.

The case reveals the acute tensions at the intersection of resource geopolitics and sustainable development. On one hand, Bolivia's resource sovereignty strategy aligns with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) by seeking to capture value-added manufacturing employment and fiscal revenues domestically. On the other hand, the strategy faces formidable structural obstacles: limited domestic technological capacity, limited access to international green technology markets dominated by Chinese and US firms, and the geopolitical leverage exercised by major battery-producing economies through supply chain control.

Bolivia's experience also raises critical questions about environmental justice. Lithium extraction in the Salar de Uyuni raises serious concerns about water consumption — a particularly acute issue in the Bolivian altiplano, where local indigenous communities depend on scarce water resources — and about the distribution of benefits between the national state and the Aymara and Quechua communities on whose ancestral territories extraction takes place. These tensions reflect a broader pattern in which the green energy transition, unless actively governed to protect community rights, risks reproducing the extractive dynamics it purports to supersede.

Critical Minerals and the New Resource Geopolitics

The emergence of critical minerals as a new axis of geopolitical competition is among the most significant and poorly regulated resource issues of the twenty-first century. The decarbonisation of energy, transport, and industrial systems requires massive quantities of lithium, cobalt, nickel, manganese, graphite, and rare earth elements as inputs to batteries, electric motors, wind turbines, and solar panels. The geographic concentration of these mineral deposits the Lithium Triangle of Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile holds over 60% of identified lithium reserves; the Democratic Republic of Congo produces approximately 70% of global cobalt output; and China dominates both rare earth extraction and the downstream processing capacity that converts raw materials into technologically usable forms — creates geopolitical dependencies and supply chain vulnerabilities that governments and corporations in advanced industrial economies have identified as matters of strategic national interest (Kalantzakos, 2020; Klare, 2019).

The competitive responses to these perceived vulnerabilities the United States' Critical Minerals Strategy, the European Union's Critical Raw Materials Act, and China's maintenance of dominant processing capacity coupled with strategic export controls on rare earth elements are ushering in a new phase of resource geopolitics whose regulatory and developmental implications are not yet fully understood. For sustainable development in mineral-rich developing economies, the implications are characterised by acute ambivalence. Rising demand for transition minerals offers potentially large economic opportunities, including strategies of resource-based industrialisation. However, the escalation of geopolitical competition risks re-enacting extractive colonial dynamics under the paradoxical banner of green development (Kalantzakos, 2020; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

Case Study: The Democratic Republic of Congo: Cobalt, Conflict, and Sustainable Development

The Democratic Republic of Congo supplies approximately 70% of global cobalt a mineral indispensable to the lithium-ion batteries powering electric vehicles and consumer electronics. Yet the DRC consistently ranks among the bottom five countries globally on the Human Development Index (HDI), with over 70% of its population living in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2023). This paradox of resource wealth amidst acute human deprivation exemplifies what critical political economists term the 'resource curse' but its roots lie less in any inherent property of mineral wealth than in the specific geopolitical and governance structures through which that wealth is extracted, priced, and appropriated.

Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) in the DRC's Lualaba and Haut-Katanga provinces involves an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 diggers, including documented cases of child labour in hazardous conditions, operating largely outside formal regulatory frameworks. Global battery manufacturers and electric vehicle companies predominantly headquartered in the United States, Europe, Japan, South Korea, and China have faced

mounting pressure from civil society organisations to audit and clean their cobalt supply chains. The OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas (2016) provides a voluntary framework, but compliance remains inconsistent and enforcement weak.

The DRC cobalt case demonstrates the direct linkages between SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). It also illustrates how the governance gap between global demand for transition minerals and effective regulation of their extraction generates developmental outcomes that undermine the very sustainability goals the energy transition is designed to advance. The absence of binding international frameworks for critical mineral governance analogous to the Kimberley Process for conflict diamonds represents one of the most urgent gaps in contemporary sustainable development governance.

Water, Food, and Hydro political Conflict

Water represents the resource dimension of contemporary geopolitics most directly linked to human survival and welfare, and the one whose geopolitical salience is growing most rapidly under the combined pressures of population growth, agricultural intensification, economic development, and hydrological disruption driven by climate change. The inequitable distribution of freshwater resources, the transboundary character of most major river systems and important aquifer formations, and the asymmetric power relationships between upstream and downstream riparian states create a situation of structural hydropolitical vulnerability particularly acute for water-scarce developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia (Zeitoun et al., 2020). The Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam dispute in which Ethiopia's construction of a major hydropower dam on the Blue Nile has generated acute political tensions with Egypt and Sudan over water allocation is an exemplary illustration of the geopolitical dimensions of water insecurity: a developmental infrastructure project necessary to Ethiopia's electrification and long-term economic growth produces zero-sum distributional conflicts with downstream states for whom Nile water flows are constitutive of agricultural viability and food security.

The geopolitics of food production constitutes an increasingly important dimension of resource sustainability. Land grabbing the large-scale acquisition of agricultural land in developing countries by foreign state and corporate actors has intensified significantly since the 2007–2008 food price crisis. This trend reflects the convergence of food security anxieties in import-dependent countries, speculative investment in agricultural commodities, and growing demand for biofuel feedstocks (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; Hickel, 2021). The displacement of smallholder communities from productive agricultural land, the reorientation of domestic food production toward export markets, and the diminution of national food sovereignty represent direct threats to SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 1 (No Poverty). The absence of effective multilateral governance frameworks capable of regulating foreign land acquisition in the interests of food sovereignty and ecological sustainability reflects the same governance gap that characterises water resource management: the failure of the territorial state system to govern resources whose developmental significance exceeds the capacity of any single sovereign authority to protect (Zeitoun et al., 2020; Flint, 2022).

Case Study: The Mekong River Basin: Upstream Dams and Downstream Livelihoods

The Mekong River, flowing from the Tibetan Plateau through China's Yunnan Province, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, supports one of the world's largest freshwater fisheries and the food security of an estimated 60–70 million people in its lower basin. Since the 1990s, China has constructed 11 mainstream dams on the upper Mekong (Lancang), and Laos has proceeded with a further eight mainstream dams in the lower basin, generating acute tensions with downstream Cambodia and Vietnam over water flow, sediment transport, and fisheries health.

The environmental consequences are measurable and severe. The Mekong River Commission (MRC) an intergovernmental body established by Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam in 1995, with China and Myanmar as dialogue partners has documented significant reductions in the Mekong's sediment load (estimated at 50–75% since the 1990s), reduced wet-season water flows, and disruption of the annual flood pulse on which

the Tonle Sap Lake fishery in Cambodia depends. The Tonle Sap fishery, producing an estimated 500,000 tonnes of fish annually, forms the primary protein source for over 15 million Cambodians.

The Mekong case is analytically important for several reasons. First, it illustrates how upstream-downstream power asymmetries, amplified by China's absence from the MRC's formal governance framework, impede effective transboundary water management. Second, it demonstrates the inadequacy of voluntary intergovernmental mechanisms the MRC lacks binding enforcement powers when confronted with the scale of infrastructure investment driven by national energy security priorities. Third, it shows how the developmental aspirations of upstream states (Laos seeks to become the 'battery of Southeast Asia' through hydropower exports) directly compromise the food security and livelihoods of downstream populations, generating zero-sum distributional conflicts that map directly onto SDG 2, SDG 6, SDG 14, and SDG 16.

SDG Linkages

SDG 2 (Zero Hunger): Land grabbing, upstream dam construction, and hydropolitical conflict directly undermine food security across developing regions.

SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation): Transboundary water governance failures compromise access to safe water and the freshwater ecosystem services on which rural livelihoods depend.

SDG 14 and 15 (Life Below Water and on Land): Resource extraction pressures driven by geopolitical competition consistently override ecological governance frameworks designed to protect biodiversity.

The SDGs in Geopolitical Context

The seventeen SDGs adopted in 2015, together with their 169 corresponding targets and 231 unique indicators, constitute the most detailed and ambitious articulation of the sustainable development agenda in the history of international governance. The universality of the 2030 Agenda which extends to all states without reference to income level and recognises the interdependence of economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development represents a conceptual advance over the Millennium Development Goals it succeeded (United Nations, 2022). However, the universality and ambition of the SDG framework exists in profound tension with the geopolitical environment within which it is expected to be realised. The 2022 SDG Progress Report indicated that the world was significantly off-track on most goal areas, with progress on many indicators having reversed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the disruption of the Ukraine conflict on food and energy markets, and the intensification of climate-related extreme weather events.

The geopolitical dimensions of SDG underperformance are multiple and mutually reinforcing. SDG 1 (No Poverty) is directly undermined by structural inequalities in global economic governance that limit developing country access to the fiscal resources and policy space necessary for effective social protection systems (Gallagher & Kozul-Wright, 2022; Hickel, 2021). SDG 13 (Climate Action) is compromised by the inability of great-power geopolitical competition to deliver the cooperative emissions reduction commitments and climate finance flows that scientific assessment has shown to be necessary — an inability rooted in the structural asymmetries of power and competitive interstate logics analysed in preceding sections (Okereke, 2021; Burchill et al., 2022). SDG 14 and 15 (Life Below Water and on Land) are impeded by the pressures of resource extraction generated by geopolitical competition over fossil fuels, critical minerals, and agricultural commodities that systematically override ecological governance frameworks. SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) is directly undermined by territorial conflicts, resource wars, and governance crises generated by geopolitical competition, particularly in resource-rich regions of the Global South where weak institutional capacity and high levels of external resource competition combine to produce chronic conflict and instability (Klare, 2019; Flint, 2022).

Global SDG progress (2023)	Only 15% of SDG targets on track for 2030 (UN SDG Report, 2023)
SDG 7 energy access gap	~685 million people without electricity access (IEA, 2023)

SDG 13 climate finance gap	Approximately USD 4–6 trillion/year needed; current flows: ~USD 630 billion
SDG 2 hunger (2022)	~783 million people facing chronic hunger rising after COVID-19
SDG 16 conflict displacement	Over 110 million forcibly displaced globally record high (UNHCR, 2023)

The specific case of SDG 7 provision of access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy illustrates with particular clarity the geopolitical complexity of SDG implementation. Approximately 685 million people worldwide lack access to electricity, with the overwhelming majority in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The geopolitical barriers to achieving SDG 7 are multiple and structural: intellectual property regimes governing clean technology limit access by developing country firms; private sector finance for international energy investment favours commercially attractive grid-connected systems while underserving rural and peri-urban communities with the lowest existing energy access; and the competitive dynamics of the global green energy industry concentrate manufacturing capacity and supply chain control in the advanced economies and China, limiting the scope for developing countries to build domestic clean energy industries (Gallagher & Kozul-Wright, 2022).

SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) the meta-goal whose achievement is a precondition for all others most acutely reflects the geopolitical constraints of the international system. The commitments embedded in SDG 17, including climate finance, technology transfer, capacity building, debt sustainability, and policy coherence, are precisely the structural reforms in international governance that this article has argued are necessary for sustainable development to be achievable within a geopolitically realistic framework. The consistent failure to honour such commitments evident in the persistent gap between the USD 100 billion annual climate finance pledge made at Copenhagen in 2009 and the finance actually mobilised reflects the structural power dynamics and competitive logics of the geopolitical order. The analytical implication is not that the SDG framework is misconceived, but that it rests on political assumptions about the character of the international environment that are inconsistent with geopolitical realities and that making the SDG framework effective requires not only technical interventions in specific goal areas but a broader political project of reforming the geopolitical environment itself (Scholte et al., 2021; Okereke, 2021).

SDG Linkages

SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals): The meta-goal whose fulfilment requires structural reform of the international financial architecture, binding technology transfer mechanisms, and coherent alignment of trade, investment, and finance policies with sustainability commitments.

SDG 1 and 10 (No Poverty; Reduced Inequalities): Structural power asymmetries in global governance directly reproduce the poverty traps and inequalities these goals seek to eliminate.

SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth): Debt service obligations and IMF conditionality constrain the fiscal space developing countries need to invest in the productive transformation that decent work requires.

Regional Dimensions: Africa as a Geopolitical and Developmental Crucible

Africa presents the starkest and analytically most acute illustration of the structural tensions between geopolitics and sustainable development. The continent holds approximately 30% of the world's mineral reserves including the vast majority of global cobalt and substantial shares of lithium, manganese, platinum group metals, and uranium; contains 14 of the world's 25 major transboundary river basins; hosts the largest tropical forest system in the Congo Basin; and is projected to experience the most severe climate change impacts and the most rapid population growth of any world region in coming decades (Kalantzakos, 2020; United Nations, 2022). These characteristics make Africa simultaneously the region with the most to gain from a geopolitics oriented toward sustainable development, and the region most exposed to the costs of a geopolitics oriented toward competitive resource extraction and strategic competition.

The intensification of great-power competition in Africa embodied in the rising military presence of the United States and France in the Sahel, expanding Chinese infrastructure investment through the BRI, the involvement of Russia's Wagner Group as a security provider in exchange for mining concessions across the Sahel and Central Africa, and Gulf state engagement in the Horn of Africa has created a geopolitical context in which African countries are increasingly the objects rather than the subjects of strategic calculation (Flint, 2022; Klare, 2019). The governance consequences are substantially adverse from a sustainable development standpoint: the entrenchment of security partnerships that prioritise regime stability over accountability; the proliferation of extractive resource concessions generating export revenues and elite rents without developmental linkages; and the displacement of national developmental planning by the strategic priorities of external powers whose interests in African stability are conceived primarily in terms of resource access and security rather than the long-term welfare of African populations.

Case Study: The Sahel: Ecological Stress, Geopolitical Competition, and Compounding Crises

The Sahel region encompassing Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania, and northern Nigeria illustrates with exceptional clarity the causal links between ecological stress, governance fragility, geopolitical competition, and the collapse of sustainable development prospects. The region has experienced some of the world's fastest warming rates approximately 1.5 times the global average with the southward advance of the Sahara, declining and increasingly erratic rainfall, and intensifying heat extremes creating conditions of resource scarcity, livelihood insecurity, and state fragility that have been systematically exploited by extremist organisations including Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

Between 2012 and 2023, the Sahel experienced a cascade of coups d'état Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), Niger (2023), Gabon (2023) driven in significant part by public disillusionment with governance failures to address the basic security and developmental needs of rural populations. The French military counter-terrorism operation, Operation Barkhane (2014–2022), focused overwhelmingly on security objectives while generating governance grievances through civilian casualties and allegations of supporting incumbent regimes. The subsequent replacement of French forces by Russian Wagner Group contractors in Mali and Burkina Faso did not represent a developmental break from this militarised logic but its continuity under different management substituting Russian strategic and commercial interests for French ones, while leaving unaddressed the structural developmental needs of Sahelian populations.

Key environmental indicators capture the scale of the challenge: the Lake Chad Basin has shrunk by approximately 90% since the 1960s, from 25,000 km² to 2,500 km², due to the combined pressures of climate change, population growth, and upstream irrigation; the Sahel has lost an estimated 3.8 million km² of productive land to desertification (UNCCD); and food insecurity affects over 27 million people across the region as of 2023 (WFP). These ecological realities directly undermine SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), illustrating how ecological collapse and geopolitical neglect interact to produce cascading development failures.

The African Union's Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represent important if structurally constrained assertions of African developmental agency within the existing geopolitical order. The AfCFTA, which entered into operation in 2021, holds the potential to create a continental market of 1.4 billion people with a combined GDP exceeding USD 3 trillion. If successfully implemented, it could shift African countries from a position of individual powerlessness in bilateral resource and trade negotiations toward a position of collective strategic weight capable of dictating terms more favourable to sustainable development (Gallagher & Kozul-Wright, 2022). However, realising AfCFTA's developmental potential requires not only the elimination of formal trade barriers but substantive investment in infrastructure deficits, regulatory harmonisation, and regional value chain development all of which require the sustained and equitable external financial support that has consistently failed to materialise in the current geopolitical order.

Regional Institutions, Civil Society, and Local Communities in Sustainable Resource Governance

A comprehensive analysis of the geopolitics of sustainable development cannot confine itself to the interactions of state actors and international financial institutions. Regional institutions, civil society organisations, and local

communities constitute indispensable yet systematically undervalued dimensions of sustainable resource governance actors whose proximity to affected populations, contextual knowledge, and accountability relationships give them both distinctive roles and distinctive vulnerabilities in the geopolitical environment.

Regional Institutions as Governance Intermediaries

Regional intergovernmental institutions occupy a structurally significant intermediary position in the geopolitics of sustainable development, operating between the national state and the global multilateral system. The African Union, through its African Climate Change Strategy and the Great Green Wall Initiative an ambitious programme to restore 100 million hectares of degraded land across the Sahara-Sahel region has sought to construct regional frameworks for ecological governance that transcend the capacity of individual member states. The Great Green Wall, endorsed by 21 Sahelian and Sudanian states, represents a regional institutional response to desertification that integrates restoration, food security, and community livelihoods directly addressing SDG 2, SDG 13, and SDG 15. As of 2023, approximately 18 million hectares have been restored, against a 2030 target of 100 million hectares (UNCCD, 2023).

In Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has developed regional environmental governance frameworks including the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (2002) and the ASEAN Biodiversity Strategy. However, ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making model and its foundational principle of non-interference in member state affairs substantially limit the enforcement capacity of these frameworks, as demonstrated by the persistent recurrence of transboundary haze from Indonesian peatland fires despite the 2002 Agreement. The contrast between the ASEAN model and the European Union's more supranationally enforceable environmental regulatory frameworks including the EU Biodiversity Strategy, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, and the EU Deforestation Regulation illustrates how the depth of regional institutional integration shapes the effectiveness of sustainable resource governance.

In Latin America, the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation (ACTO) uniting the eight Amazonian states has provided a regional institutional framework for Amazon governance, though its effectiveness has been severely constrained by the divergent domestic political trajectories of member states. The contrast between the Bolsonaro administration's (2019–2022) rollback of Amazon protection in Brazil under which deforestation reached a 15-year high of over 11,000 km² in 2021 and the Lula administration's subsequent commitment to achieving zero Amazon deforestation by 2030 illustrates how regional governance frameworks are ultimately conditioned by domestic political dynamics shaped by broader geopolitical pressures including trade relationships, commodity price cycles, and access to international capital markets.

Dimension	**African Union (AU)**	**European Union (EU)**
Enforcement power	Weak; consensus-based; limited sanctions capacity	Strong; legally binding regulations; carbon border mechanisms
Climate governance	African Climate Change Strategy; Great Green Wall	EU Green Deal; Fit for 55; Carbon Border Adjustment
Financial instruments	Limited; dependent on external climate finance	EUR 1 trillion Green Deal Investment Plan; EIB climate mandate
Deforestation regulation	National-level; ACTO in Amazon; weak enforcement	EU Deforestation Regulation (2023); binds supply chains globally
SDG integration	Agenda 2063 aligned with SDGs; implementation gap	European Green Deal formally integrated with SDG framework

Civil Society Organizations and Transnational Advocacy

Civil society organisations (CSOs) encompassing international NGOs, domestic advocacy groups, research institutions, faith-based organisations, and transnational social movements constitute a critical layer of

sustainable resource governance that both complements and challenges state-centric geopolitical frameworks. CSOs have been instrumental in shaping the normative evolution of international environmental law and sustainable development frameworks, from the civil society coalitions that mobilised around the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro to the advocacy networks that secured the Loss and Damage mechanism at COP27 in 2022 a historic recognition that climate-vulnerable countries deserve compensation for climate impacts beyond their adaptive capacity.

In the domain of extractive industry governance, transnational civil society campaigns have driven the development of voluntary and regulatory frameworks including the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) which as of 2023 includes 57 member countries committed to disclosing oil, gas, and mining revenues and the Publish What You Pay coalition. These initiatives have created accountability mechanisms that, while lacking the enforcement power of binding international law, have generated significant progress in fiscal transparency in resource-rich developing countries. However, the effective implementation of transparency frameworks is persistently constrained by the geopolitical interests of major corporations and capital-exporting states whose governments resist binding international due diligence requirements that would impose costs on their corporate sectors.

The transnational environmental justice movement, including organisations such as Friends of the Earth International, La Via Campesina (the global peasant farmer network, representing approximately 200 million small-scale farmers), and the Pacific Climate Warriors coalition, has brought the lived experiences of frontline community's farmers, fishers, indigenous peoples, and climate-displaced populations into international policy arenas dominated by state and corporate actors. La Via Campesina's advocacy for food sovereignty as an alternative to the WTO's trade liberalisation model has achieved formal recognition in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (2018), establishing normative precedent for community rights in agricultural governance that directly supports SDG 2 and SDG 10.

Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples as Resource Governance Actors

Local communities and indigenous peoples represent not merely the subjects of resource governance but its most consequential and most frequently overlooked practitioners. Centuries-old community-based governance systems for forests, fisheries, rangelands, and water resources have demonstrated remarkable effectiveness in sustaining ecological productivity precisely because they embed governance within the social relationships and ecological knowledge of the communities most dependent on the resources concerned. The Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom's foundational research on the governance of common-pool resources demonstrated that community-based governance, when embedded in appropriate institutional conditions, consistently outperforms both state regulation and market privatization in sustaining resource productivity over long time horizons (Ostrom, 1990).

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) established the principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) as the standard for decision-making about projects affecting indigenous peoples' lands, territories, and resources. However, the practical implementation of FPIC in the context of critical mineral extraction remains deeply inconsistent. In the DRC's cobalt belt, in the Lithium Triangle, and in rare earth mining regions of Myanmar and China, indigenous and local community rights to meaningful consent are routinely overridden by a combination of state sovereignty claims, corporate pressure, and the geopolitical urgency attached to securing transition mineral supply chains. The tension between FPIC as a human rights norm and the geopolitical imperative of securing critical minerals for the green energy transition represents one of the most acute and unresolved ethical challenges in the contemporary politics of sustainability.

Community-based adaptation (CBA) initiatives locally designed and managed responses to climate change impacts have demonstrated consistent effectiveness in building the livelihood resilience of rural communities in climate-vulnerable regions, including the Sahel, South Asia, and Pacific island states. Programmes such as the CGIAR's climate-smart agriculture initiatives and the International Fund for Agricultural Development's (IFAD) community-led programmes have documented significant improvements in food security, ecosystem health, and household income in communities that receive support for locally-driven adaptation. However, international climate finance flows remain heavily concentrated in large infrastructure projects and financial instruments

legible to international capital markets, systematically underserving the community-scale initiatives that evidence suggests are among the most cost-effective investments in sustainable development.

SDG Linkages

SDG 5 (Gender Equality): Women's land rights and participation in resource governance are both key determinants of sustainable resource management outcomes and targets of SDG 5 recognising that gender justice and ecological sustainability are structurally linked.

SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions): The effective inclusion of civil society and local communities in resource governance is both an SDG 16 institutional quality indicator and a prerequisite for the equitable distribution of resource benefits that SDG 10 demands.

SDG 15 (Life on Land): Community-based conservation models and indigenous resource governance systems are among the most evidence-supported mechanisms for achieving SDG 15's biodiversity and land restoration targets.

Toward a Sustainable Geopolitics

The analysis developed in this article points toward a set of propositions for what might be called a sustainable geopolitics: an analytical and normative framework that reconceptualises the relationship between geographic space, political power, and natural resources around the imperative of collective ecological sustainability rather than the competitive logic of national territorial advantage. This reconceptualisation is not merely a normative aspiration but an analytical imperative, grounded in the recognition that the geopolitical order as currently constituted is producing ecological outcomes including anthropogenic climate change, mass biodiversity loss, and the disruption of planetary biogeochemical cycles that constitute existential threats to the conditions upon which all human development depends (Dalby, 2020; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

The first proposition concerns power: achieving sustainable development requires a deliberate redistribution of structural power in global governance toward the developing countries that suffer most from unsustainable development and have least influence over the rules and institutions governing the global economy and environment. This redistribution involves concrete institutional reforms rebalancing voting shares in international financial institutions, establishing automatic and predictable climate finance flows independent of annual pledge cycles, reforming intellectual property regimes to enable developing country access to clean technologies, and establishing multilateral debt restructuring mechanisms capable of preventing the debt crises that force developing country governments to prioritise debt service over developmental investment (Gallagher & Kozul-Wright, 2022; Hickel, 2021; Okereke, 2021). These reforms represent not charity but justice: the recognition that the structural power advantages of the Global North have been developed, in part, at the expense of the developmental potential of the Global South, and that sustainable development at the global scale requires addressing rather than perpetuating this structural inequality.

The second proposition concerns space: the governance of global commons must be redesigned around principles of collective ecological responsibility rather than national competitive advantage, with institutional frameworks capable of managing the transboundary ecological processes that the Westphalian state system was not designed to govern. This includes strengthening the institutional capacity and enforcement mechanisms of multilateral environmental agreements, devising new governance structures for the global ocean and the cryosphere, and establishing accountability mechanisms to address states whose domestic resource extraction decisions generate transboundary ecological harm (Scholte et al., 2021; Burchill et al., 2022).

The third proposition concerns resources: the shift to a sustainable global economy requires governing the extraction and processing of critical resources in ways that distribute developmental benefits equitably, limit ecological damage, and ensure that the communities and countries on whose territories extraction takes place capture sufficient value to fund their own developmental and ecological priorities. This calls for binding international frameworks for critical mineral governance; the reform of bilateral investment treaty networks to enhance host country regulatory powers; and the creation of mandatory environmental and social due diligence

requirements for multinational corporations in resource extraction sectors (Kalantzakos, 2020; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

A fourth proposition addresses the roles of regional institutions, civil society, and local communities in sustainable geopolitics: an effective sustainable geopolitics must move beyond a state-centric analytical framework to recognise these actors as constitutive elements of sustainable resource governance. This recognition requires designing international governance frameworks that create space for civil society participation in decision-making, protect the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities through binding FPIC mechanisms, and channel adequate financial resources to community-based adaptation and conservation initiatives. Regional institutions such as the African Union and ASEAN must be supported — through adequate technical and financial capacity — to develop enforceable regional environmental governance frameworks that complement and reinforce global multilateral agreements. The evidence from community-based natural resource management, indigenous territorial governance, and civil society advocacy consistently demonstrates that sustainable outcomes are most reliably produced when the communities most dependent on resources are most meaningfully empowered in their governance.

A fifth proposition addresses the specific developmental imperatives of the Global South: a sustainable geopolitics must recognise and actively support the right of developing countries to pursue nationally determined development paths that prioritise the wellbeing of their populations and the integrity of their natural endowments including development paths that deviate from the market-liberal model historically imposed by structural power. Food sovereignty, resource-based industrialisation strategies, and heterodox macroeconomic policies that prioritise social protection and ecological investment over fiscal austerity must be accorded legitimacy within international governance frameworks rather than being systematically constrained by conditionality mechanisms that serve the interests of dominant states and creditors (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; Hickel, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the relationship between geopolitics and sustainable development through three analytical lenses the distribution and exercise of power in the international system, the contestation and governance of geographic space, and the competition for control over natural resources and has further analysed the roles of regional institutions, civil society, and local communities as actors in sustainable resource governance. It has demonstrated that these dimensions of geopolitics are not secondary complications to the sustainable development agenda but its structural context, fundamentally determining what is possible, at what pace, and for whom.

The article's analytical contribution lies in its insistence that geopolitics and sustainable development must be analysed in constitutive relationship to each other rather than as parallel fields of scholarly inquiry. The SDG framework, for all its ambition and conceptual sophistication, cannot be delivered in a geopolitical context characterised by structural inequality, great-power competition, and a logic of national territorial advantage that systematically overrides collective ecological responsibility. Conversely, geopolitical analysis that is blind to ecological and developmental dimensions is analytically impoverished and practically inadequate to the challenges of the Anthropocene. The integration of critical geopolitics, environmental geopolitics, political ecology, development studies, and perspectives on civil society and community governance into a coherent analytical framework guided by the normative imperative of sustainability and anchored in structural geopolitical realities is the scholarly task this article has sought to advance.

The case studies presented throughout the article from DRC cobalt to Bolivian lithium, from the South China Sea to the Mekong basin, from the Sahel crisis to Norway's sovereign wealth governance model illustrate how the structural dynamics of geopolitical power, spatial contestation, and resource competition manifest in concrete developmental and ecological realities. The comparative analysis of developed and developing country experiences reveals the depth of the governance asymmetries that the SDG framework must confront, and the statistical data integrated throughout the article grounds these theoretical claims in measurable terms. Together, these empirical materials support a consistent finding: that the costs of geopolitical dysfunction in the domains of power, space, and resources are disproportionately borne by the most vulnerable countries and communities those least responsible for creating the structural conditions from which they suffer most.

The normative argument of this article is that a reconceptualised sustainable geopolitics oriented toward the collective reproduction of planetary conditions upon which all human development depends, rather than the competitive accumulation of national territorial advantage is not merely desirable but increasingly necessary. The compounding crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, resource scarcity, and developmental inequality are generating geopolitical instabilities that will, if unaddressed, make the achievement of sustainable development more rather than less difficult. The inclusion of regional institutions, civil society organisations, and local communities as recognised and resourced actors in this reconceptualised geopolitical framework is not a supplementary consideration but a structural imperative: the evidence consistently shows that sustainable outcomes in resource governance, climate adaptation, and ecological conservation are most reliably produced when the communities most affected are most meaningfully empowered.

The restructuring of geopolitics in the service of sustainability is among the most pressing intellectual and political challenges facing scholars and practitioners of international affairs in the coming decades. It requires the analytical work of mapping the links between geopolitical structure and developmental outcome a task this article has sought to advance. It demands the normative work of articulating a conception of national interest that encompasses the long-term sustainability of the planet. It requires the institutional work of establishing multilateral governance frameworks capable of managing great-power competition, governing global commons, and ensuring the equitable distribution of resource wealth. And it requires recognising that these institutional frameworks will only be durable if they are anchored in the participation, knowledge, and rights of the regional institutions, civil society actors, and local communities who must ultimately implement and legitimise them. The scholarly task is to map this terrain with the rigour and honesty the stakes demand; the political task is to act with the urgency that a planet in the grip of compounding ecological and developmental stress requires.

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