Geopolitics of Greed: Resource Competition and the Erosion of Global Cooperation and Responsibilities

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Abstract

The twenty-first century has witnessed intensifying global competition over vital resources like energy, water, food, and critical minerals- driven by strategic rivalry, economic nationalism, and technological transitions. This paper argues that a politics of narrow self-interest or "geopolitics of greed" increasingly shapes state behaviour, and that this resource competition erodes the foundations of global cooperation and shared responsibility. Drawing on realist and institutionalist perspectives, and illustrated with contemporary empirical cases (critical minerals and the energy transition, vaccine nationalism during COVID-19, transboundary water stress, and food-energy shocks), the paper analyses mechanisms by which resource competition transforms cooperation into contestation. It then examines the systemic costs of such dynamics- institutional erosion, inequitable outcomes, amplified crises, and fragmentation of global governance- and proposes policy pathways to restore cooperative capacity: diversifying supply chains, strengthening multilateral frameworks for common-pool resources, designing equitable crisis-sharing mechanisms, and fostering normative shifts toward responsible interdependence. The paper concludes that restoring durable cooperation will require both technical remedies and political will to re-embed responsibility in the governance of shared resources.

Keywords

Resource competition, geopolitics, critical minerals, vaccine nationalism, transboundary water, global cooperation, institutional erosion

Introduction

Access to and control over natural resources have been central to politics since the origins of any state. In recent years, however, resource competition has taken on new forms and urgency. The global -

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energy transition, driven by decarbonization, has created unprecedented demand for critical minerals (lithium, cobalt, rare earth elements), intensifying strategic rivalries over supply chains. Concurrently, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of global public-goods provisioning when rich states prioritized domestic access to vaccines. Climate change and population pressures have heightened transboundary water stress in many regions, and food security remains vulnerable to geopolitical shocks. These trends reveal a pattern: when states or powerful non-state actors treat resources as instruments of narrow national advantage, cooperative institutions fray and shared responsibilities are neglected. This paper calls that pattern the "geopolitics of greed." It defines the concept, situates it within relevant international relations (IR) theory, and analyses its impacts through empirical cases. The analysis proceeds in four parts. First, framing the theoretical and conceptual groundwork: defining geopolitical greed, resource competition, and the forms of cooperation that are eroded. Second, empirical evidence from four domains- critical minerals and the energy transition, pandemic vaccine geopolitics, transboundary water stress, and food-energy shocks to demonstrate how resource competition manifests and corrodes cooperation will be presented. Third, the systemic consequences: institutional erosion, inequitable outcomes, crisis amplification, and fragmentation of global governance will be analysed. Fourth, policy and normative remedies to restore cooperative management of the common resource will be proposed. Throughout, the argument is that technical fixes (diversification, reserves, recycling) are necessary but insufficient: meaningful progress depends on institutional reforms and normative commitments that rebalance immediate national interests with long-term shared responsibilities.

This paper starkly illuminates how contemporary resource rivalries do not affect all actors equally: the burden falls disproportionately on poor nations and the world's most vulnerable populations. When powerful states and transnational firms securitize supply chains, prioritize national stockpiles, or impose export controls, the immediate strategic prize is often captured by wealthier actors but the downstream effects are borne by those with the least capacity to absorb shocks. In practice this means that poor countries lose bargaining power over the extraction, pricing and processing of their own resources; their ecosystems are degraded to supply distant industries; and their economies remain locked into low-value, extractive roles while the high-value manufacturing and refining stages capture most profits and technological spillovers.

The mechanisms of exploitation are multiple and mutually reinforcing. Unequal trade structures and investment contracts, often negotiated under imbalanced political pressure or indebtedness, lock resource-rich but capital-poor countries into contracts that favour multinational corporations and importing states. Tax avoidance, weak regulatory oversight, and opaque concession agreements further

leak rent away from local publics. In crises, the pattern becomes more acute: vaccine nationalism, grain export bans, or preferential access to critical minerals translate directly into delayed access to medicines, food price spikes, and stalled development projects in poorer countries. Meanwhile environmental externalities-pollution, deforestation, water depletion- impose health and livelihood costs on local communities that rarely figure in the balance sheets of distant beneficiaries.

The human consequences are severe and cumulative. Communities lose land and traditional livelihoods, face involuntary displacement, suffer worsening public health outcomes, and see opportunities for local industrialization and skills development foreclosed. As resource values rise globally, local inequality often widens: elites and internationally linked actors capture new rents while rural and marginalized groups remain impoverished. The moral dimension is also important: claims of "civilized" stewardship ring hollow when the practices of powerful states and corporations undermine the sovereignty, rights and agency of poorer peoples. Such injustice erodes social cohesion, fuels grievance, and in some cases contributes to conflict-ironically increasing the very insecurity that geopolitically driven actors justify to secure resources.

Addressing these asymmetries requires more than technical fixes: it demands a redistribution of voice, rights and revenues in global resource governance. Policies that would make a real difference include transparent and mutually fair contract standards, stronger domestic capacity for resource regulation, genuine technology transfer and local value-addition requirements, equitable crisis-sharing mechanisms, and international tax cooperation to prevent offshore rent extraction. Above all, the geopolitics of resources must be reframed from a zero-sum contest to a matter of global justice: until the systemic patterns that privilege the wealthy are corrected, the language of cooperation will remain largely rhetorical while poor nations and poor people continue to pay the cost.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

"Geopolitics of greed" is used here to describe state and elite behaviours that instrumentalize access to strategic resources primarily for short-term competitive advantage, bargaining leverage or domestic political gain-often at the expense of long-term global public goods, equity, and multilateral cooperation. This phenomenon includes resource nationalism, export controls, hoarding, techno-protectionism, and the strategic weaponization of supply chains. It is distinct from traditional power politics by centring economic and resource leverage as primary means of influence in an interdependent world.

Theoretical Anchors: Realism, Institutionalism, and Constructivism - The phenomenon has explanatory roots in multiple IR traditions. Realism foregrounds states' security and material interests: competition over resources is an expected dimension of power politics (Mearsheimer, 2001). Institutionalists, however, emphasise that repeated interaction and institutional design can mitigate anarchy's worst effects-creating rules, monitoring, and reciprocal institutions that sustain cooperation (Keohane, 1984). Constructivists add that norms, identities, and shared expectations shape whether states treat resources as commons requiring stewardship or as spoils to be appropriated. The geopolitics of greed emerges where realist incentives dominate in the absence of resilient institutions and where normative frameworks for shared responsibility are weak or contested. Several mechanisms explain how resource competition erodes cooperation such as the dominant producers may employ quotas, export controls or technology restrictions to obtain leverage, prompting importers to securitize supply chains and respond with protectionist or strategic measures. In emergencies (pandemics, food shocks), states prioritize domestic populations-creating unequal access and reducing incentives to cooperate. When major powers view multilateral frameworks as constraining, they may sidestep or weaken institutions, reducing collective problem-solving capacity. The domestic political incentives (electoral cycles, industry lobbying) favour visible national actions (hoarding supplies, subsidizing domestic miners) over invisible long-term cooperative investments. The competition in high-tech sectors (semiconductors, defense) turns resource interdependence into strategic vulnerability, encouraging securitization rather than shared management. These mechanisms operate interactively to transform cooperation into contestation.

Empirical Manifestations: To make these mechanisms concrete, we can examine four domains where resource competition has produced clear challenges to cooperation: critical minerals and the energy transition; vaccine nationalism in the COVID-19 pandemic; transboundary water stress and violence; and food and energy shocks that feed geopolitical rivalry.

Critical Minerals, Energy Transition, and Strategic Interdependence: The clean-energy transition is mineral-intensive. Wind turbines, EV motors, and battery networks require lithium, nickel, cobalt, graphite, copper, and rare earth elements (REEs). The International Energy Agency (IEA) and other multilateral analyses have documented steep demand growth for many of these minerals as decarbonization accelerates (IEA, 2023). This rapid shift has geopolitical consequences. Some countries currently dominate many refining and processing steps for REEs and other critical minerals. Market concentration creates leverage: export curbs or technology restrictions by dominant suppliers can disrupt global manufacturing chains and produce strategic dependencies (IEA, 2023; IRENA, 2023).

Recent supply-side manoeuvres illustrate the geopolitics of greed. Financial and policy actors have warned of heightened risk to global REE supply chains due to export curbs and concentrated refining capacity (Goldman Sachs; Reuters reporting, 2025). Policymakers in importing countries have responded with strategic initiatives-partnership agreements, stockpiling, and industrial subsidies-to diversify sources and reshore critical stages of production (WEF, 2024; LSE commentary, 2025). While such actions may enhance national resilience, they can also institutionalize fragmentation and produce competitive dynamics that reduce incentives for cooperative governance of mineral resources. The result is an arms race of supply-chain securitization that can raise costs, slow the energy transition, and provoke retaliatory policies.

Vaccine Nationalism and Pandemic Governance: The COVID-19 pandemic exposed how crisis politics can become an arena for selfish resource politics. Wealthy states secured bulk purchases of early vaccine supplies and, in some cases, prioritized domestic immunization irrespective of global equity considerations. Scholars and analysts have characterized this as "vaccine nationalism," showing how hoarding and export restrictions extended the pandemic's economic and human costs by delaying universal coverage (Hafner et al., 2020; Riaz, 2021). Vaccine nationalism reduced incentives to finance global distribution platforms early and undermined trust in multilateral mechanisms (e.g., COVAX), amplifying global health inequities.

The pandemic case demonstrates the mechanism of hoarding under time-pressure and uncertainty that turns a shared public good into a scarce asset subject to geopolitical competition. In the absence of binding or enforceable global allocation rules and with powerful domestic political incentives, cooperation faltered-resulting in avoidable mortality, slowed economic recovery, and political fallout.

Transboundary Water Stress and Resource Violence: Water scarcity is an increasingly salient geopolitical risk. Climate change, population growth and upstream developments (dams, diversions) have exacerbated tensions over shared rivers and aquifers. While many transboundary basins are governed by cooperative agreements, stressors have increased incidents of water-related violence in several regions. Recent reporting has documented an alarming rise in attacks on water infrastructure and disputes over access, notably in conflict zones (Pacific Institute aggregate reporting; The Guardian reporting on 2023 increases in water-related violence). Where upstream states seek unilateral control over water flows for economic or political ends, downstream states may perceive existential threats, further degrading trust, and cooperation. Water geopolitics demonstrates how a vital resource can become a direct instrument of geopolitical pressure. Where institutions for joint management are weak

and strategic incentives favour unilateral gains, cooperation frays-often with humanitarian consequences.

Food, Energy Shocks and Strategic Fragmentation: Food and energy markets are tightly linked to geopolitical contestation. Conflicts, sanctions, and export restrictions can create cascading effects on global food security. The 2022–2023 period revealed how war, blockade, and sanctions disrupted grain supplies, elevating food prices and triggering policy responses such as export bans. These reactive policies often enacted under domestic political pressure intensify global scarcity and encourage reciprocal measures by other states. The result is volatility and fragmentation of markets that historically depended on relatively open trade. Thus, short-term national protections in one crisis can magnify insecurity globally, demonstrating the feedback loop where resource competition produces greater systemic fragility.

Systemic Consequences: The empirical cases reveal a pattern of systemic consequences arising from geopolitics of greed. When major powers or coalitions treat global institutions instrumentally-engaging only when alignment with narrow national goals exists, institutions decay. The weakening of multilateral arrangements reduces information sharing, collective problem solving and enforcement capacity. Crisis response suffers as a result: fragmented action, duplication of effort, and unequal burden-sharing. The resource competition tends to advantage actors with preexisting economic and political power. Hoarding of vaccines, control over refining capacity for critical minerals, or unilateral water projects often disadvantage poorer and downstream states. These inequities undermine the normative legitimacy of international governance and fuel grievances that can escalate political instability and conflict. The short-term, self-protective measures often exacerbate crises. Export bans on food, protectionist industrial policy, and securitization of supply chains raise prices, reduce efficiency, and lower global resilience. For example, delaying the energy transition by politicizing critical minerals raises long-term climate risks-paradoxically undermining the very security that geopolitical actors seek to protect. A key systemic dynamic is the creation of rival blocs organized around secure resource access (e.g., informal mineral partnerships, bilateral supply agreements). While such blocs may provide some stability for members, they fragment global governance and reduce the prospects for universal rules or equitable burden-sharing. Fragmentation can also encourage zero-sum calculations in crises.

Policy Pathways to Restore Cooperation and Responsibility: Given the stakes, what can policymakers, international institutions, and civil society do to counteract the geopolitics of greed and

rebuild cooperative capacity? The remedies require a mix of technical, institutional, and normative measures.

1. Diversification and Strategic Resilience (without weaponizing interdependence): States should pursue supply-chain diversification, recycling, substitution research, and strategic reserve policies to reduce vulnerability. However, diversification must be implemented transparently and cooperatively (e.g., shared strategic reserves or regional processing hubs) to avoid incentivizing, protectionism. Multilateral frameworks for transparency in critical-mineral trade and for technology transfer can reduce fear-driven securitization while improving collective resilience.

2. Strengthening and Reforming Multilateral Institutions: International institutions need updating to manage 21st-century resource challenges. Reform should focus on inclusive governance (voice for developing countries), enforcement mechanisms (to deter export controls that cause systemic harm), and crisis-sharing protocols (for vaccines, food, and energy). For example, treaty provisions for equitable access, pre-agreed allocation rules, and mutual assistance clauses in pandemics could reduce incentives for hoarding.

3. Legal and Normative Frameworks for Commons Stewardship: Establishing binding norms and legal agreements for the stewardship of critical commons (transboundary waters, fisheries, global public-goods like pandemic vaccines) can shape state expectations and reduce opportunism. Norm entrepreneurship-by coalitions of states and normative actors (NGOs, religious groups) can foster shared responsibility.

4. Equity-Focused Mechanisms and Compensation: To address legitimate development needs, global mechanisms should include compensation, finance, and technology transfer to help resource-poor states transition (e.g., green industrial policy assistance). A failure to balance distributional concerns will perpetuate resource competition driven by insecurity and inequality.

5. Crisis-Ready Cooperative Architectures: Pre-negotiated mechanisms for crisis allocation (for vaccines, grain, energy) akin to contingency treaties could be designed and ratified now. Such mechanisms would specify trigger conditions, allocation formulas and financing arrangements, reducing the temptation to resort to ad hoc hoarding when crises strike.

6. Normative Reframing: From Short-Term Gain to Interdependence Responsibility: Finally, rebuilding cooperative regimes requires normative change. Political leadership, public education, and

civil society campaigns can reframe resource interdependence as mutual responsibility rather than vulnerability to be weaponized. International dialogues and transnational advocacy can help cultivate cooperative norms that endure beyond electoral cycles.

Discussion

Combining realist caution with institutionalist optimism yields the most practical policy approach. Realism warns that states will act on material incentives; institutionalism indicates that well-designed institutions can alter incentives and stabilize cooperation. The geopolitics of greed flourishes where institutions are weak or where dominant actors find unilateralism politically convenient. Thus, responses must address both material vulnerabilities (technical supply chains, stockpiles) and governance deficits (representation, enforcement, equity). A recurring dilemma is that many cooperative remedies depend on the very same political will that resource competition undermines. For instance, building binding global allocation rules for vaccines requires trust that others will comply-trust that evaporates when states have previously hoarded supplies. Overcoming this paradox requires leadership by credible coalitions willing to bind themselves first (leadership by example), and creative incentives for compliance (trade benefits, financing support). Another important insight is that not all responses labelled “securitization” are harmful. Some degree of strategic awareness such as prudent diversification and investment in domestic processing capacity can increase resilience without destroying cooperation if pursued in transparent, non-zero-sum ways. The challenge is to distinguish prudent resilience from aggressive geopolitics of greed.

Conclusion

The geopolitics of greed-resource competition driven by narrow state interest poses a serious threat to the cooperative institutions and shared responsibilities that underpin global stability. Contemporary cases such critical minerals in the energy transition, vaccine nationalism, transboundary water tensions, and food/energy shocks illustrate how competition over resources can corrode cooperation, producing inequity, institutional erosion, and amplified crises. So, preventing further erosion demands both technical fixes and political reform. The diversification of supply chains, deepening multilateral institutions, creating crisis-ready allocation mechanisms, and fostering normative commitment to shared responsibility are all essential. Importantly, the remedies must address distributional inequalities: only by embedding equity and inclusion into resource governance can the world reduce incentives for zero-sum competition. The alternative is bleak: a fragmented international system in which resources become instruments of coercion, cooperation atrophies, and global crises magnify. The choice policymakers face is not merely managerial but ethical that whether to treat shared

resources as instruments of power or as foundations for a stable, equitable world order. Reasserting responsibility and rebuilding cooperation is both a practical necessity and a moral imperative.

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