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RETHINKING THE EU'S ROLE IN TACKLING INTERCONNECTED ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS AMID GEOECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SHIFTS

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REGROUP
REBUILDING GOVERNANCE AND RESILIENCE OUT OF THE PANDEMIC

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Culminating more than a decade of crisis in Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic has opened an important window of opportunity for institutional and policy change, not only at the "reactive" level of emergency responses, but also to tackle more broadly the many socio-political challenges caused or exacerbated by Covid-19. Building on this premise, the Horizon Europe project REGROUP (*Rebuilding governance and resilience out of the pandemic*) aims to: 1) provide the European Union with a body of actionable advice on how to rebuild post-pandemic governance and public policies in an effective and democratic way; anchored to 2) a map of the socio-political dynamics and consequences of Covid-19; and 3) an empirically-informed normative evaluation of the pandemic.

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Executive summary

This paper delves into the EU's approach to interconnected environmental risks, set against the backdrop of evolving geoeconomic and political dynamics. It first addresses the European Green Deal, initiated in 2019, and its subsequent strengthening through initiatives like Fit for 55 and REPowerEU. These initiatives signal a strong commitment to decarbonisation and climate targets; however, the implementation of this ambitious agenda is being challenged by factors such as high inflation and increasing political resistance, with some governments expressing opposition to environmental policies. The prioritisation of security and defence has also somewhat overshadowed the climate crisis across the EU bloc.

The analysis examines the key features and trends of a decarbonised global landscape and the requirements for its effective management. It also addresses the internal and external challenges that will confront the EU in the period from 2025 to 2035. Given this background, the author evaluates four prospective scenarios where the EU does or does not have a role in a global governance reform that does or does not happen. In the first scenario, there is a reform of global governance but without an active EU role; the second scenario foresees 'green globalisation', where the EU leads the global governance reform; the third one involves a strong EU leadership but not channelled in a global governance reform; the final scenario lacks both a global governance reform and a strong EU leadership.

The paper ultimately argues that the EU needs to adopt internal and external measures to prevent the widening of the climate and social divide, both within the EU and between the Global North and Global South. It identifies several critical factors: finding a balance between engagement and disengagement with China, strengthening European industrial production where possible, and diversifying green value chains accordingly by forging stronger partnerships in the Global South. In this sense, the author argues that the EU must engage more effectively with emerging and developing economies in pursuing decarbonisation strategies. The paper cautions that increasing international fragmentation could lead to higher costs for accessing low-carbon materials and minerals, and it suggests that the EU should enhance its competitiveness through its inherent strengths while avoiding excessive and ineffective protectionist policies.

Keywords: EU Climate agenda; environmental risks; decarbonisation; EU global leadership; just transition

Introduction

The Green Deal launched by the first von der Leyen Commission in 2019 put forth an impressive set of regulations, tools, and policies. Politically, the process has encountered some tensions around the structural interests of EU member states, which have slowed down the adoption of certain decisions. Its legislative path has also faced two major crises: the pandemic and the energy crisis that has intensified since the 1970s. Despite these complex circumstances, the EU green agenda was reinforced from 2020 to 2024, with resources invested in the decarbonisation process and the upward revision of climate targets through Fit for 55 and REPowerEU (Giuli and Bianchi 2023).

However, the current context challenges the implementation and further development of this green agenda. Spikes in energy prices and high inflation have hit citizens and industries across the EU, which blamed 'Brussels' in several cases, as did many populist parties that are latching onto climate policy. In domestic contexts, a general resistance to the implementation of the Fit for 55 plan is growing, and some governments now show obstructive attitudes towards environmental policies that – in their narrative – fuel injustice. Moreover, security and defence have surpassed the climate crisis as a priority for voters and decision-makers. Thus, the Green Deal is now couched in a broader narrative focused on prosperity and industrial competitiveness (von der Leyen 2024).

Globally, the securitisation of supply chains has brought about tougher competition and tensions between superpowers, further highlighting the EU's vulnerabilities (Fabry and Matelly 2025). Around the world, rising nationalism threatens the advancement of climate action; paired with misinformation, it creates further distrust and stalemates in essential talks such as COPs. Trump's 'America First' approach might constitute a problem for the EU bloc, which has limited leverage in avoiding a growing EU–US energy price gap in the short term. In the meantime, the world may experience the end of the multilateral architecture that emerged after World War II. The US has once more withdrawn from the international climate framework, a decision that will affect climate funding and slow the pace of energy transformation worldwide. Trump has committed to reversing course on climate policies, scaling back on clean energy investments, and implementing high tariffs on various partners, including Europe, likely affecting market access and supply chains in an unexplored way. Additionally, BRICS nations are wielding greater influence, and tensions between developed and developing countries are deepening.

Coupled with the EU's structural weaknesses, these conjunctural tensions threaten both Europe's industrial competitiveness and clean tech leadership ambitions as well as its very path to climate neutrality. Rising fragmentation at the international level may lead to higher costs for accessing low-carbon materials and minerals as well as basic

materials (Bianchi and Sangiorgio 2025). The EU 2040 emission reduction target is far from being cemented into law, but – on the bright side – the EU seems on track to cut 54 percent of emissions by 2030 (European Commission 2025). However, the 2040 mid-term target remains crucial, as it will also form the basis of the EU's 2035 updated Nationally Determined Contribution to be submitted before COP30 in Brazil.

The EU's role in tackling interconnected environmental risks is thus very uncertain. This paper analyses (i) the main features of a decarbonised world and the aspects of its orderly management and (ii) the internal and external challenges faced by the EU in the 2025–2035 decade. By cross-referencing these elements and trends with the four prospective governance scenarios developed in the first foresight paper of the REGROUP project (Burguete 2024), the author attempts to define the European modalities of resilience in the face of environmental impacts.

The main features of an increasingly decarbonised world

The broader deployment of cleaner energy in the world has begun to reshape political relationships and redefine energy security concepts, generating new challenges and opportunities. Additional changes will occur as the transformation accelerates, and how Europe navigates these shifts is vital for meeting its climate objectives and ensuring an orderly-managed and 'just' transition – both inside and beyond its borders.

First, in a progressively decarbonised world, the concept of energy security itself undergoes changes. Attention gradually moves from securing waterways, pipelines, and physical volume deliveries to protecting electricity networks, storage systems, and batteries, among others. A progressive replacement of fossil fuels may lead to reduced conflicts over energy control due to the lower energy density and geographical concentration of renewables, as well as the essentially inexhaustible supply. Renewable energy also has the capacity to reduce impacts on resources (e.g., water), establishing a stronger foundation for security and sustainable progress (International Renewable Energy Agency 2028). Additionally, clean energy sources may generate substantial trade balance improvements for current net fossil fuel importing areas (including the EU) while reducing their vulnerability to supply disruptions and price fluctuations. The decentralisation and regionalisation trends of energy production, consumption, and distribution – as well as the broader electrification and digitalisation of energy systems – will reshape energy security priorities and create new vulnerabilities and opportunities for countries (Franza et al. 2021).

Second, global energy systems will simultaneously become more mineral-dependent, since technologies such as solar panels, wind turbines, electric vehicles, and batteries typically require significant mineral inputs (International Energy Agency 2022). The ongoing exposure of technology, materials, and supply chains to global market fluctuations makes it vital to control fundamental market conditions and prevent supply–demand imbalances that could trigger disruptions and price increases. Looking at critical raw materials (CRMs), the existing market structure reveals multiple supply-side vulnerabilities: geographic concentration and price instability, along with political, governance, human rights, and environmental challenges (Raimondi 2025). Another key vulnerability is time: decarbonisation must happen quickly, and all these dependencies cannot be fixed rapidly enough. China in particular controls the extraction, refinement, and processing of essential CRMs (Glaser and Wulf 2023); thus, many other countries have been worrying about the possible strategic use of its supplies and have tried to find alternatives.

Seeking to develop such capacities only within the EU, however, is either impossible – as in the case of CRMs – or too costly – as in the case of a total repatriation of clean tech. The EU could act in between, depending on its competitive advantage and vulnerability in each sector, finding ways to diversify where needed and strengthening domestic industries where possible. This is where the EU's Global Gateway initiative (Tagliapietra 2024) – or the newly established Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships (CTIPs) – might play a role in developing resilient green supply chains, especially with partners in the Global South, becoming the export arm of a new EU industrial policy while helping economic development in partner countries. While supply diversification is one element of reducing vulnerability, technological advancement remains equally important. Increased circular economy and innovation means that new industries can stockpile, reuse, and recycle critical materials, as well as find less mineral-intensive solutions, thereby increasing overall efficiency and lowering geopolitical risks.

Third, declining fossil fuel demand creates risks for fossil fuel–producing nations. Reduced export revenues threaten political, social, and economic stability in regions like MENA and former Soviet states. In Europe, poor management of the relationship with these regions could spark social and political unrest with spillover effects beyond their borders. This risk requires continued diplomatic engagement for gradual transitions in export-dependent countries. If properly managed, the move away from fossil fuels could also help reduce rent-seeking, cronyism, and corruption in many of those countries. Cross-border renewable energy trade could also create new interdependencies and partnerships, given sufficient investments in generation capacity and infrastructure (Franza et al. 2021).

Fourth, there is no global mechanism that comprehensively addresses the multi-dimensional and changing facets of energy and climate needs. Currently, for example, energy is covered by organisations that are multilateral but have low normativity, or organisations that have selective geographical membership or 'partisan' energy interests (e.g., consumers vs. suppliers) – something that is clearly shifting. Furthermore, there is still a stark division between (national, regional, partisan) energy governance and international climate governance, the latter being mostly covered by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Given that around three quarters of climate action is related to the energy transition, it is hard to understand how concrete progress can be made without greater synergy (Franza et al. 2021). Moreover, the increasing nexuses linking climate and energy with other policy areas (e.g., migration, security, justice) are increasingly complex to manage, although they are crucial.

A final consideration concerns the elements of justice in the transition. While tackling climate change impacts can only be a collective, global job, different regions, countries, and stakeholders are approaching the transition from very different conditions or circumstances. For instance, richer countries (including those of the EU) have historically coupled their economic growth with increased emissions and are largely responsible for today's climate change impacts. On the other side, certain regions of the world – particularly Sub-Saharan Africa – are unable to meet the very basic energy needs of their populations while simultaneously being disproportionally affected by the impacts of climate change that they have not contributed to creating. Parties around the world have indeed 'common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities to take climate action' – a staple of the international climate consensus since the Kyoto Protocol. A 'just' transition is thus the only possible transition, and it needs to consider these disparities. Linked to this debate is the reform of the international financial system, whose current imbalances weigh disproportionally on developing countries (Bekele 2025).

Internal and external challenges for the EU in the run up to 2035

It is thus clear that an equilibrium between cooperation and competition is needed to achieve the transition on time. However, collaboration between countries is at risk. Globalised supply chains provide significantly lower prices for renewables around the world, resulting in their extensive access and scalability in the past decades (Raimondi et al. 2023). A new emphasis in Europe on 'resilience', 'strategic autonomy', 'reshoring', or 'friendshoring' some industrial capabilities due to growing geoeconomic tensions is now a reality. These attempts to redraw the map of manufacturing hubs have

given rise to significant trade tensions that may ultimately impact development-oriented investments and the future of inclusive and sustainable economic integration. Complicating the search for a balance between decarbonisation, trade, industry, and sustainable development cooperation goals is the growing distrust in multilateral institutions' ability to address these multi-dimensional tensions. Strong institutions should in principle provide platforms to ensure that climate policies do not devolve into protectionism, but it seems that there is still little interest in adapting or transforming institutions to navigate an increasingly complex global governance context (Grabbe and Tagliapietra 2025).

Another problem is the current centrality of policy areas for which Europe has fragile or still embryonic instruments – clean industrial policy in particular. For many years, European institutions have often seen industrial and competition policy as being in tension, and the pursuit of decarbonisation goals in Europe has remained relatively disconnected from a reflection on the industrial dimension of the transition. Within this framework, a difficult balancing exercise emerges for Europe between pursuing decarbonisation, achieving (open) strategic autonomy in green supply chains, and maintaining fiscal discipline. This trilemma opens new areas of contention, especially related to economic instruments such as relaxations in fiscal discipline for climate goals or the development of additional common fiscal instruments (Giuli and Bianchi 2023). On this domain, EU member states are still very fragmented.

In the short to medium term, the politicisation and polarisation of climate policies is one increasing challenge for a speedy transition. Technological progress and innovation, falling clean-tech costs, public and private funding, and consumer demand have been the primary drivers of clean energy adoption over the past three decades, and they will remain essential for the continued expansion of these energy sources globally. These elements require clear and stable policy frameworks, which are now challenged in Europe by stronger resistance to climate policies. Although the European Commission (which in principle remains committed to the Green Deal) is the key actor in keeping climate policy on the defined tracks, the Commission itself is now showing a much more prudent approach towards green dossiers – in many cases, proposing simplified rules or withdrawing proposals (Bianchi and Sangiorgio 2025).

Money is another fundamental problem. For instance, a wider use of electric vehicles requires charging infrastructure, and more efficient houses need retrofitting. These and many other processes require funding. Sustaining homegrown manufacturing bases has proven to be very expensive as well: for example, Northvolt – long considered an industrial champion – has failed to stay operational. Incentives to ensure that citizens and industries drive demand towards different (cleaner) solutions are also an essential part of the equation. As the post-Covid funding wave ends, the debate about capital

mobilisation is key, especially as the EU faces many other contingent spending priorities (namely, security and defence). Some options have been proposed in the framework of the Clean Industrial Deal (Bianchi and Sangiorgio 2025), and research has shown that there is no trade-off between defence and climate spending (Tagliapietra 2025). In general, as the challenge is common, it is also hard to imagine the required acceleration of the transition without advanced countries' financial support being stepped up.

Against this background, the institutional ecosystem in Europe is still unprepared to govern these challenges, and the EU faces difficulties in finding and projecting a cohesive and coherent response beyond its borders (Grabbe and Tagliapietra 2025). In the past institutional cycle, the Commission tried to 'mainstream' climate policies both at the internal level and, with significantly fewer results, in foreign policy. The last decade has certainly seen a growing nexus between climate, economy, and energy, and, in policy terms, 'nexus thinking' has been permeating European foreign and security policy. However, the EU is still far from where it should be. Despite these evident weaknesses, the EU aims to influence climate policies beyond its borders and support the multilateral climate agenda in a just and orderly way, and its continuation also plays an enabling and legitimising role for domestic climate policies. These could take the form of 'cap and trade' market-based mechanisms, carbon taxes, bans on importing commodities that do not respect certain standards, regulations, or funding instruments – the specifics do not matter, so long as such policies are effective in inducing decarbonisation. However, many EU measures impacting Third World countries should better consider these countries' perceptions and preparedness to navigate its implications (Grabbe and Tagliapietra 2025).

Possible scenarios

Given the structural and contingent challenges analysed above, different scenarios in the 2025–2035 decade are thus possible. The EU could have a strong or weak role as a climate leader, it could find (or not) a balance between cooperation and competition, and the bloc may or may not be cohesive and ready to anticipate and address global risks.

A first scenario would see the EU lose its active role in the transition and have a weak global role. Institutionally, climate diplomacy in Europe would continue to be spread across functions and institutions, without sufficient incentives to coordinate effectively. Similarly, an unclear division of responsibilities would make climate-related actions a low priority in external relations. In terms of policy, the EU would abandon its climate mainstreaming approach and reinforce a siloed approach, with low priority given to advancing climate mitigation and adaptation policies. In this scenario, the EU faces

stronger distrust from Global South partners because its regulations, tools, and policies impacting Third World countries are ill-designed and thus perceived as negative and hostile, with more penalising aspects for partners compared to benefits. As developing countries have many partners to choose from, ties with Europe would not be perceived as a priority. This scenario would entail weaker ESG criteria in trade relations: while in recent years the EU has moved towards substantiating the sustainable development chapters in its trade agreements, this would not be an essential element of future free trade deals. Similarly, the established carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM), set to enter into force in 2026, would be abandoned or diluted, as well as many other regulations impacting beyond borders (e.g., EUDR). The principle of 'common but differentiated responsibility' would create even more tensions between Global North and Global South partners, and the EU would not play a relevant role in levelling them. Finally, in this scenario, consensus on the transition would be lacking both internally and externally.

An opposite scenario would see the EU reinforcing its green vision and truly embracing its leadership role in global governance reform and in the strengthening of a just green agenda. The EU would work to break down the remaining silos at the institutional level and reinforce its ability to capture the complexities of climate governance in its internal and foreign reach. While the EU would use every policy and tool in its power to support a multilateral orderly management of the transition, it would simultaneously support and guide the smallest climate clubs that might want to speed up their efforts. In this scenario, the EU would increasingly support mitigation efforts around the world and the related financial needs, while adaptation efforts – strongly advocated for in Global South countries – would continue to lag behind the actual requests of developing areas. However, attention on adaptation would grow, and the EU would be an advocate and engage with global partners to increase financial flows on adaptation and loss and damage, recognised as fundamental elements of a just transition. Internally, the EU would be able to define its competitiveness agenda (i.e., what sectors and domains to which it should apply its attention and financial resources); externally, it should accordingly set up partnerships to minimise its remaining vulnerabilities, shifting its narrative from a strategic 'autonomy' to a strategic 'interdependence' with increasing attention on ESG standards along the value chains.

A third scenario would see the EU advancing its regulatory power on climate change without really engaging on a sustainable global reform or considering its climate agenda's effects beyond its borders. Internally, the bloc would implement measures that impact Third World countries without attention to the social, political, and economic impacts as perceived by partners. Retaliatory measures would thus increase against the EU, reinforcing distrust among countries and worsening cooperation – aside from

Third World countries' access to EU markets. Fierce competition in the clean tech space would also arise, making it difficult to achieve the transition on time and in a cost-efficient manner. Partners' consensus on decarbonisation processes would fade, along with internal consensus, as EU citizens and industries would be bearing the economic and social costs of carbon leakage.

A fourth scenario sees the EU losing any leadership ambition in both climate action and the reform of sustainable global governance. Here, the 'justice' element of decarbonisation is ignored, and there is no urgency in advancing the transition both internally and externally. Consequently, climate finance flows – for both mitigation and adaptation – are redirected away from the transition towards other priorities. Similarly, the international financial system would not be reformed, and developing countries would face growing problems in responding to both mitigation and adaptation needs. Attention to supply chain transparency and ESG criteria would fade, leading to missed opportunities for the EU and partner countries. Such a scenario would also increasingly fuel instability around the world, as little coordination would be possible on international trade, and disparities would increase.

Visualising a realistic agenda for Europe

Fragmentation is not an option in today's Europe. In the next months, many important Green Deal–related dossiers need approval or at least progress, and the bloc must be united when operationalising its internal and foreign tools accordingly. Realistically, however, there is a risk that shifting priorities at the EU level could be reflected in a smaller disbursement of EU financial reallocations, despite the general support of the new Commission on the European Green Deal. There may be a 'pragmatic' way forward by the Commission, Parliament, and member states, where some delays in the implementation of the Green Deal may happen, or some tactical steps back may be made by the EU executive to avoid a radicalised opposition from parts of the Parliament or from national governments. Such a scenario would allow the EU to stick to the fundamental objectives and budget money for the green transition in the sectors that need it most, but it could also result in a slower implementation and definition of the remaining work. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that the EU would pursue its decarbonisation agenda with the same vigour as it did in the previous institutional cycle. At the same time, the current economic and security context in Europe strengthens the case for a much bigger uptake of renewables and clean options, given the volatility of fossil fuel prices. Also, geopolitical developments (in the MENA area, the Gulf region, and the US[1]) may help strengthen support for non-fossil fuel supplies from conservative parties in Europe as well.

1. As Europe has expanded its reliance on non-Russian LNG, the evolving situation in the strait of Hormuz and the ongoing tariff negotiations with the US may cause several problems for the EU's security of supply.

A sine qua non for the success of the European Green Deal is that the EU equips institutions, governance, and communication for the challenge. Although the second scenario analysed above will not realistically be achieved, the EU can nevertheless work towards that optimistic vision. Institutionally, stronger coordination is needed to better assess the speed of the transition and the evolution of energy security across regions and sectors and, ultimately, to be better aligned across areas of government (Grabbe and Tagliapietra 2025). It would also be key for the EU to promote stronger integration of global energy and climate needs into a more comprehensive global governance architecture as much as it can. The EU can also be a stronger advocate for the redefinition of the global financial system, which would create more inclusive conditions for sustainable development.

More than ever, it is clear that the EU's tools and narratives for engaging with society are built for a world that has since evolved. Transformations of the Green Deal's scale risks creating not just winners but also potential losers, making it inevitable that the latter will make their voices heard. Their concerns must be addressed and eventually compensated. This also applies to neighbouring countries. Much like it has established specific internal initiatives such as the Just Transition Fund and the Climate Social Fund to prevent the regressive socio-economic effects of the transition and thus ensure its political acceptance, the EU will need to develop external measures to avoid deepening the climate and social cleavage between the Global North and Global South (Grabbe and Tagliapietra 2025). Many of the existing instruments are not sufficiently comprehensive, and some new ones will need to be designed from scratch; realistically, in this institutional context, not all of the needed instruments will find financial support. However, the Commission can learn from its past mistakes and make sure that structured investments in the transition and a new green social contract walk hand in hand, not at different speeds.

The growing appreciation of the security risks of excessive dependence on China will likely remain and might even accelerate the EU's industrial rethinking exercise. On the other hand, the EU should understand by now that swinging the pendulum too far towards disengagement from China risks hampering the transition and prohibitively high costs that are unsustainable for Europe. Finding an equilibrium between engagement and disengagement with China and boosting European production through public funds and a capital markets union while diversifying green value chains through strengthened partnerships with the Global South is a difficult exercise. The EU should strengthen its competitiveness through its own characteristics and avoid embracing excessive and ineffective protectionist policies (Raimondi et al. 2023).

An additional related lesson learned concerns partners' perceptions when pursuing the bloc's decarbonisation strategies. The EU can and needs to engage more efficiently with emerging and developing economies. One realistic test is how the EU will support them

in moving from extraction to higher value-added activities of critical raw materials, creating more local economic opportunities. This, too, is a way to build consensus. Lastly, as complex as the situation is, the EU cannot continue delaying the orderly and coherent transformation of its relations with traditional energy partners. As for what concerns the Mediterranean area, a realistic advancement in the current institutional cycle could be coordinated by the newly established Mediterranean and Gulf-region directorate.

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