

Summary: This policy brief sets out to unpack energy security in light of contemporary developments in the energy landscape, both in Europe and globally. It argues that nation state-centric framing of energy security is not the way forward. With China, India, and a lengthy list of other formerly poor countries now online as major energy consumers and importers, more global coordination and less securitization is needed.

Thinking Outside the Box: Energy Security in Europe and Beyond

by *Corey Johnson, Ph.D.*

Introduction

In case there were any doubt, the agenda of the May 2013 EU Summit of heads of state in Brussels confirms that energy is on the minds of many European leaders. Developments in the natural gas sector, specifically, were front and center, with topics such as liquefied natural gas (LNG) infrastructure, the imminent decision on a Southern Corridor pipeline, and the prospects for gas field development in the Eastern Mediterranean on the agenda. Many of these discussions are framed using a favorite concept among policymakers, academics, and industry analysts: “energy security.” Energy security is a fuzzy concept whose frequent use in policy circles — at meetings such as the EU Summit — has long outstripped its usefulness in shaping the discussions about the real energy challenges facing Europe and the rest of the world.

Instead of providing clarity, it obscures the real issues that underlie discussions of energy: political and economic power relations; resource scarcity and correspondingly unsustainable levels of consumption; and the extent to which energy dependence leads to poor policymaking. It locks us into

thinking about energy systems as corresponding to national or supranational boundaries, when in fact energy systems are increasingly global and transboundary in scope and function. It allows us to think of security as corresponding to the organizing logic of the sovereign state system. It causes action-reaction cycles that benefit no one. And yet it continues to be a powerful idea. This policy brief sets out to unpack energy security in light of contemporary developments in the energy landscape, both in Europe and globally.

Energy Security as an Outgrowth of National Security

Access to reliable sources of energy has been a major focus of statecraft since at least the early 19th century. “Energy security” as a way of framing questions of energy access and provision dates to the 1970s. Massive growth in fossil fuel consumption required the energy-rich United States to import an ever-larger share of its domestic requirements from abroad and made the country vulnerable to the oil embargoes at the hands of oil-producing countries that protested against U.S. involvement in the Middle East. Meanwhile, western

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European countries were also facing increased consumption and growing imports.¹ In the United States, the Carter Doctrine essentially made acts by other states that threatened the United States' unimpeded access to foreign energy a national security issue: If you cut us off, you are threatening our vital national interests. Wealthy, resource-poor countries in Europe and Asia, such as Germany and Japan, quickly adopted the trope of energy security for guiding policy decisions, although without the same threat of military action that the United States appeared to put on the table.

Almost by design, the concept of energy security allows wide interpretation and room for action. It is fuzzy, lacking precision, and often used without definition.² For example, neither the "U.S. Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007" nor the "North American Energy Security Act" (a failed House bill that would have required the secretary of state to act on the Keystone XL pipeline) defined the term. A survey of academic literature by Sovacool and Brown found four key aspects to energy security:

1. *availability* or "do we have enough";
2. *affordability*, "at the right price";
3. *efficiency*, "can we use less and get the same output"; and
4. *sustainability*, "are we irreparably harming the environment through energy production and use."³

State actors have mainly focused on 1 and 2, and only recently have 3 and particularly 4 been high on policy agendas anywhere, mainly in Europe and a handful of individual U.S. states. From a raw political gamesmanship standpoint, the focus on availability and affordability is understandable, since electoral backlashes against politicians because energy was not sustainable enough are unfortunately quite rare (post-Fukushima regional elections

in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, in 2011 being a possible exception).

The energy security framing that emerged during the late 20th century posed it as an existential issue: the well-being of the state, and therefore the humans that inhabit the state, is fundamentally at risk if energy does not continue flowing.⁴ Of course, the actual energy that Americans or Europeans need in order to function represents a small fraction of the actual energy we consume, a fact that is rarely mentioned at the policy level because lifestyles in the transatlantic realm involve energy intensive goods and services that reflect particular values and enjoy widespread acceptance. Nevertheless, this turns somewhat askew the original meaning of "security," namely an individual's freedom of apprehension about safety, and it instead makes security about maintaining the ability for citizens, businesses, and governments to consume at stable, uninterrupted levels without regard to the environmental costs or scarcity of fossil fuels. Few would argue that if Americans or Luxembourgers were to use half of their current consumption of energy in kilograms of oil equivalent per capita per year, thus putting their consumption on the order of Slovenia or Germany, individual safety or even the viability of the state as such would be put at grave risk.⁵ But at least in the United States, the lesson many politicians learned from President Carter's very sensible attempts to encourage less waste and more

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1 Paul Belkin, "The European Union's Energy Security Challenges," (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008).

2 For a critique of fuzzy concepts, see A. Markusen, "Fuzzy concepts, scanty evidence, policy distance: The case for rigour and policy relevance in critical regional studies," *Regional Studies* 33, no. 9 (1999).

3 B.K. Sovacool and M.A. Brown, "Competing dimensions of energy security: An international perspective," *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 35(2010).

4 See, e.g., B. Buzan, O. Wæver, & J. De Wilde. *Security: A new framework for analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

5 International Energy Agency data available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.USE.PCAP.KG.OE/countries>. Incidentally, Luxembourgers actually use more energy per capita than Americans, but this is likely the result of Luxembourg's high concentration of heavy industry.

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energy efficiency was unfortunately that it is a political loser to mess with consumption.

Problems with Energy Security

As a fuzzy concept, energy security means different things in different places and to different constituencies. Everyone needs energy services to survive; in fact all human activity is about energy. If a person is impoverished of energy, and thus unable to have access to the basic needs of life such as cooking, warmth, and water, it is a serious matter. However, beyond the basic questions of survival there is no threshold for knowing when energy security has been attained. What sounds like it should be able to be quantified — as in the “do we have enough energy” question — becomes instead a purely subjective exercise. As a practical matter, the securitization of energy leads to foreign affairs ministries and even militaries taking leading roles on issues that would on the surface seem to be purely domestic and/or economic issues.

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This subjectivity, in turn, leads states — both those that have excess energy and those that require additional energy — to behave in both destructive and self-destructive ways. Just as Russia’s playing politics with the natural gas it supplies to its European neighbors is counterproductive and ultimately foolish, so too is a reaction by other states to such actions that does not consider reducing overall consumption of energy as a fundamental piece of “energy security.” Ideas matter, however, and the ways in which issues are framed have real consequences. The geopolitical understandings of energy security that emerged from the 1970s, and continue to resonate in questions ranging from hydraulic fracturing for shale gas (“fracking”) in Poland to proposed LNG exports from the United States to oil and gas in the South China Sea, pose energy as an existential question with survivalist, masculinist metaphors. Energy is

a “weapon” over which there are “battles.” Governments fear being “ransomed” or “blackmailed.”⁶

Another shortcoming relates to the tenuous relationship between national security and energy security. International relations as an academic field of study has internalized the fixed map of well-defined states as containers for politics, economics, cultures, and so forth, and the practice of international relations both reflects and reinforces this way of seeing. International borders are where the national interests of one state end, and those of another state begin, and precious few question the primacy of the state system in governing human affairs. Of course, the world is not this simple, and nowhere is this more evident than in questions of energy. First, there are material linkages that transcend international borders and create interdependencies that operate often irrespective of the formal relations between states. The Soviet Union provided West Germany, including West Berlin, with natural gas practically without interruption between the 1970s and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and Russia continues to be a remarkably reliable supplier to a unified Germany via two major pipelines. The USSR was seen to be even more reliable than Norway, which at the time was struggling with stable flows of gas from its offshore fields. Under Hugo Chavez, the bane of U.S. Western hemisphere foreign policy, Venezuela exported 40 percent of its oil to the United States, largely because U.S. refineries were best equipped to handle the country’s low-quality crude.

Second, in an era of easy mobility for both goods and humans across borders, the national-energy interest model would have us believe that we live in a zero-sum world of interests, in which one state’s gain is another’s loss. Sports metaphors simply do not work when it comes to energy; there is no win-loss table. The unsuitability of the marriage between energy security and national security becomes most apparent in the EU context, where member states have been extremely reluctant to cede competencies in energy matters to the Commission. While few would argue that the EU is fundamentally post-national, there is very little logic in the manner by which energy has become one of the lingering “national” concerns. The EU energy policy as such is incomprehensible precisely because many member states

⁶ Felix Ciută, “Conceptual Notes on Energy Security: Total or Banal Security?,” *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 2 (2010).

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have resisted the Europeanization of it — so much so that agriculture seems, by comparison, thoroughly European.

Another shortcoming of energy security in this context is that it is often in direct opposition to environmental security. In spite of sustainability being increasingly used in academic literature on energy security, the fact of the matter is that energy policies in most parts of the world continue to emphasize access to sufficient supplies, not access to sustainable supplies.⁷ The concept in practice has evolved very little, even as governments become more aware of global climate change.

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Much of the preceding discussion can be seen playing out in the EU-Russian energy relationship. As Tim Boersma shows in his companion policy brief, the concerns expressed in Central and Eastern Europe about Russia's use of the energy weapon are not entirely supported by facts, although they are perhaps understandable when placed upon the long arc of history in this part of the world. Meanwhile, the United States has stood, under multiple administrations, at the front of the line of actors politicizing and securitizing energy supplies in Central and Eastern Europe, encouraging the already deep skepticism toward Russian motives in countries such as Poland and the Baltic States. The Baltics have a more compelling argument when it comes to Russia using energy as a weapon. At the same time, the commercial promotion mandate of the U.S. State Department evidently requires the selling of shale gas and hydraulic fracturing at any gathering in central Europe where the word "energy" is uttered. At a meeting in Latvia in 2006, in the wake of a Russia-Ukraine gas supply disruption, then-Senator Dick Lugar called for an "energy Article 5," referring to the NATO mutual security guarantee. Poland has also called for an "energy NATO." Although this was never

implemented, it would have been the ultimate expression of energy security as a narrow expression of a people's inalienable right to consume as much or more aggregate energy tomorrow as it did yesterday. Russian observers with any sense of irony must be amused to observe the discussions in the U.S. Congress in 2013 over the "Expedited LNG for American Allies Act of 2013," perhaps better called "Fast Gas for Friends," which manages in its title both to politicize and securitize the United States' newfound shale gas wealth, taking a page from the Russian playbook, as it were.

Possibilities for the Future

Our world is increasingly securitized, not just in the realm of energy. Human security, food security, environmental security — the list is practically endless — shape policy-makers' thinking on a range of issues, and the point being made here is not that all security is bad. Energy security is a powerful idea in large part because it turns the mundane matter of energy provision into something more visceral. By turn of phrase, it makes energy supplies for states into what it once was only for individuals: something essential for life, worth cooperating, but also in certain instances, fighting over. But states in the modern economy are not Cro-Magnon, and the evidence for inadequate energy provision providing the impetus for war in recent decades is very thin. What, then, should policymakers focus on if not energy security?

As the focus of this paper suggests, the nation state-centric framing of energy security is not the way forward. With China, India, and a lengthy list of other formerly poor countries now online as major energy consumers and importers, more global coordination and less securitization is needed. Yet China is showing a willingness to engage with the topic of energy on the terms that the United States and the European Union have set up, namely that of energy security. This can be witnessed in the now still minor disputes over energy sources in the China Seas, or in China treating the Mekong River Basin as a source of hydroelectric power with seemingly little regard for the downstream effects of dam construction.

The conversation about energy cannot be allowed to happen in a different room than the one about climate change. They are two sides of the same issue. Europeans are

⁷ The resource nexus approach provides a framework for understanding the relationship among various resources and environmental degradation, see e.g. Philip Andrews-Speed et al., "The Global Resource Nexus: The Struggles for Land, Energy, Food, Water, and Minerals," (Washington, DC: Transatlantic Academy, 2012).

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well ahead of the United States on this, which is one reason why it is troubling to observe Poland's intransigence on EU climate policy, and its selling of shale gas solely as a security hedge against a belligerent Russia rather than as part of a decarbonization strategy. There are some encouraging signs on the issue of climate change and energy, such as the World Economic Forum's incorporation of climate change as an integral component of energy security. While Davos is an admittedly elite club, committed to a certain model of economic globalization, it is a positive sign that those leading the charge on globalization also recognize that it makes no sense to treat energy as an intrinsically national matter and one somehow distinct from the environmental challenges we face. The unconventional hydrocarbons revolution in North America has sparked conversations about natural gas as a "bridge fuel," and if — repeat *if* — that enthusiasm could be coupled with policy actions on climate change and carbon pricing, such a bridge could be a very powerful idea indeed.

Ideas matter, and the concept of energy security has been central to how we understand the politics and economics of energy over nearly four decades. As the globe becomes increasingly interconnected, it is time to think outside the box when it comes to energy.

About the Author

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