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Deconstructing the “energy weapon”: Russia’s threat to Europe as case study

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ABSTRACT

As the likelihood increases that Russia will dominate the European Union’s (EU) energy supply, questions have emerged as to whether Russia would use the *energy weapon* to influence EU member policies and extract political concessions. Countervailing voices argue that Russia would be restricted by interdependence and market forces. As of yet, no one has analyzed the assumptions underlying the energy weapon thesis. Moreover, many scholars examining EU–Russian energy relations rely on non-Russian data. This article seeks to fill several informational and theoretical gaps by including Russian sources and first-hand data and by systematically analyzing the conditions that must obtain before an energy supplier can successfully convert its energy resources into political power. The resulting model can be utilized to analyze the capacity of a supplier to use the energy weapon—whether it be Russia, Iran, Venezuela or any other energy heavyweight—and to assess whether the deployment was successful. Five purported cases of Russian manipulation are analyzed in this article and the findings indicate that, more often than not, Russia failed to achieve political concessions. Looking to the future, the plausibility of Russia using the energy weapon to exploit Europe’s dependence, particularly on gas, is also examined.

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1. Introduction

The tighter energy markets of recent years combined with the political instability of several energy producing countries have elicited widespread anxiety about energy availability (Yergin, 2006). Among the primary energy security concerns of policy makers and analysts are the resurgence of resource nationalism, the prospect of resource wars, and the vulnerability of energy dependent countries to political manipulation. The threat that energy exporting countries could use their control over energy supplies to influence the political behavior of client states was called the oil weapon during the 1973 oil embargo. In recognition that suppliers can manipulate other energy sources, such as natural gas, this article will use the term *energy weapon*.

Recent energy weapon threats include the oil disruptions vowed by Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez in 2008 (Wilson, 2008) and by Iran’s Ayatollah Khamenei in 2006 (Shanker, 2006). These threats were overt, but the energy weapon can also be deployed covertly—or implicitly—as Russia has purportedly done on numerous occasions over the past two decades. Despite the risk posed by use of the energy weapon and the numerous references to this danger expressed in the energy security literature, no one

has yet systematically studied the energy weapon. In April 2010, the Council on Foreign Relations convened a group of experts to discuss the current state of energy security research. They described a need for case study work and systematic analysis of the relationship between oil and gas supply and political decision making (Levi, 2010). Russian activities in the gas sector were specifically mentioned as a valuable area of inquiry.

This article fills those gaps by accomplishing several intertwined objectives: first, systematically disaggregating the component parts of the energy weapon; second, providing a model of the energy weapon that can be utilized to analyze the capacity of any supplier to convert its energy resources into political power; third, ascertaining, through a review of Russia’s behavior over the past two decades, if and how Russia has accomplished the steps necessary to wield the energy weapon; and, fourth, conducting before-after analyses of several oft-cited cases of Russia’s deployment of the energy weapon and ascertaining whether Russia has indeed attempted to coerce political concessions. By examining how states targeted by Russia responded, insight will be gained into Russia’s potential danger to Europe.

2. Russia as an energy superpower

Russia’s propensity to inflict energy disruptions on its customers in the former Soviet Union and in the former Warsaw Bloc—such as the cut-offs to Ukraine in 2006 and 2009—raises

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the question as to whether Russia would (or could) levy an energy weapon against countries of the European Union (EU). For forty years Russia has been a reliable energy supplier to Western Europe. As this section demonstrates, despite this track record, suspicions linger that Russia will use disruptions—or the threat of disruptions—to further its foreign policy and national security objectives.

Some analysts, arguing that Russian–European energy interdependence would temper any Russian inclination to employ the energy weapon, lament the Cold War tone of recent discussions (Stent, 2008). Proponents of the interdependence argument in the U.S. note that disruptions would be economically counterproductive as “Russia has little flexibility to suddenly change the flow of its gas exports that are wedded to European markets by pipe. Its only option would be to forego gas exports altogether” (Jaffe and Soligo, 2008, 35). The interdependence argument also holds sway in Europe where many scholars believe Russia would not risk its relations with major European countries, which it needs to guarantee its long-term prosperity, for short-term political gain (Eden-Fleig, 2007; Götz, 2007; Rahr, 2006). Other analysts and policy-makers, however, are less sanguine.

Among the adherents of the energy weapon thesis are notable Eurasian scholars, foreign policy experts and policy makers. United States Senator Richard Lugar (2008), in a hearing of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, expressed concern that Europe’s increased dependence on Russia and its vulnerability to disruptions would result in “less [NATO] alliance cohesion on critical foreign policy issues,” presumably because Europe would be moderating its foreign policy to appease Russia. A taskforce sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations (2006) and jointly headed by two members of the U.S. Congress warned “Russia has used energy exports as a policy weapon.... The reassertion of government control over the Russian energy sector increases the risk that this weapon will be used again (4).” *The New York Times* has also linked Russia’s energy power with its foreign policy objectives: “Now that Russia is seeking to reclaim the geopolitical clout it had in Soviet days, it is wielding its vast energy resources, rather than missiles, to reassert itself (Kramer, 2008).”

Although disagreements abound over how Russia may potentially use its energy resources, almost no one disagrees about its hydrocarbon reserves or potential. In 2009, Russia had 5.6% of the world’s oil reserves, almost 24% of gas reserves, and 19% of known coal reserves (BP, 2010). Russia is the world’s leading gas exporter, with Europe receiving over 95% (EU ca. 60%) of that supply (Gazprom Factbook). Some European countries are more dependent than others: Germany, for example, receives over 40% of its gas from Russia. Italy, France, and Greece also receive gas from Russia, at 26%, 22%, and 70%, respectively (Gazprom Factbook). This gas is delivered by Gazprom, the former Soviet Ministry of the Gas Industry. The ability of the Kremlin to instigate a disruption against a gas customer would require state control over Gazprom’s deliveries.

3. The Kremlin and Gazprom

In many ways, Gazprom appears to operate as the Russian national gas company: the state earns 8% of its GDP through its 51% ownership of Gazprom (Ericson, 2009) and has the right, which it has exercised on more than one occasion, to shake up Gazprom’s management. Moreover, the revolving door between the Kremlin and the leadership of Gazprom (Dmitry Medvedev, for example, served as the Chairman of the Board for Gazprom prior to becoming Russia’s President) indicates that Gazprom’s decision-makers are acutely aware of the Kremlin’s foreign policy

goals. In return, Gazprom controls 65% of Russia’s proven natural gas reserves (plus reserves it controls with partners) and produces 90% of Russia’s gas.

Gazprom claims to be an independent commercial company and has undertaken a public relations initiative to promote this view. In 2010, for example, high-level Gazprom executives visited with a small group of energy industry elites in Germany and, during an off-the-record discussion, dismissed any notions that Gazprom could be used by the Russian government for political reasons.¹ These denials contrast sharply with opposing opinions about Gazprom’s role. As Stelzer (2008), Director of Economic Policy Studies at the Hudson Institute, stated: “To view Gazprom or any Russian energy company as anything other than instruments of Russian foreign policy is to be naïve in the extreme (17).” This perception of Gazprom and its pipelines is echoed, perhaps in less caustic language, by many others, such as Krastev et al. (2010) at the European Council on Foreign Relations and Vatansever (2010) at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The fact that non-Russian observers hold this view is not surprising, but over the years, Russian sources—and even officials—have also linked Russia’s gas resources and Gazprom’s control over pipelines with Moscow’s political power.

In 1997, the Russian Ambassador to the Czech Republic directly linked Russian gas deliveries to the Czech Republic’s position on NATO membership (Naegele, 1997). The Russian state news agency *RIA Novosti* (2005) freely made reference to “gas attacks”—the Russian term for energy weapon—and the use of gas supply as a coercive or punitive tool. In 2008, two Russian journalists published a book, *Gazprom: The New Russian Weapon*, replete with details of how and when Gazprom has carried out Moscow’s foreign policy objectives (Zygar and Panyushkin, 2008). Beyond anecdotes and speculation, however, the confirmation of the Kremlin’s power over Gazprom is provided by President Medvedev, who acknowledged in a 2010 interview that gas prices played a key role in the Russian–Ukraine arrangement over the Black Sea fleet (Interfax, 2010). Moreover, the Russian Ministry of Energy’s (2011) website states that Russia’s energy resources are an “instrument for domestic and foreign policy”. Given the Kremlin’s majority ownership of Gazprom, its relationships with the various company executives, and the linkages of gas and politics by Russian official sources, the assumption in this article is that, although Gazprom may usually operate as a commercial enterprise, when the Kremlin calls, Gazprom answers.

4. The energy weapon

Although the Kremlin has some measure of control over Gazprom, the question remains: can Russia’s resources actually be converted into real political power and yield foreign policy gains? The *energy weapon model* presented here analyzes the stages that must be accomplished before a state can be considered to have transformed energy resources into political capital. This model is based on the recognition that, for a state to wield energy supply as a weapon, several conditions must be satisfied. First, the state must consolidate the country’s energy resources. Second, the state must acquire control of transit routes. Third, the state must use the energy resources in an attempt to further its own political objectives by—either implicitly or explicitly—threatening, punishing, or rewarding a targeted client state.

Most literature and public statements on energy security and the energy weapon concentrate exclusively on stage three (Baran, 2008; Lugar; 2008; Smith, 2006; Stelzer, 2008; Woehrel, 2009).

¹ Author’s interview with meeting participant, February 19, 2011.

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