Climate policy goals, including the pursuit of low carbon sources of energy, are related to energy security goals.
“Europe’s foreign policy interests have changed. Managing climate risk and an orderly global energy transition are now critical to Europe’s security and prosperity.”

INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) has increasingly interconnected energy and climate policy, with the formulation of the Energy Union as one notable — if yet incomplete — step in this direction. In addition to the linkages between energy policy and efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to meet climate goals under the Paris Agreement, the EU has been increasingly vocal about the link between climate and security, and undertaken (at least rhetorical) efforts to incorporate climate security concerns into broader externally focused policy areas.

This shift toward a focus on climate security, however, raises questions of how energy security and climate security relate, the impact of the former on the latter, and how the Energy Union fits into this shift, as well as how the EU characterizes climate risk and how this relates to geopolitical risks in its broader neighborhood. It also begs the question of how to go beyond identifying and conceptualizing the security risks posed by climate change to addressing them.

This paper charts changes in the EU’s energy and climate security discourse, focusing on their intersection in the Energy Union and the EU’s promotion of the energy transition to lower carbon forms of energy, and the relevant risks in the European neighborhood. The paper concludes that while the EU has evolved to include climate priorities and climate risks into foreign and security policy thinking, the complicated relationship between climate change and security complicates efforts to operationalize this in the EU, in relations with the broader European neighborhood, and beyond.

EU POLICY: DEVELOPING SECURITY IDEAS

Energy security, considered as the reliable provision of reliable, affordable, and sustainable energy, has long been a framing concept in geopolitics and in European discourse, while the notion of climate security is newer but increasingly prominent on the European agenda. The growing attention to climate security has occurred alongside steps that link the EU’s energy and climate portfolios. The EU has also adopted a more cohesive, strategic, and externally focused approach to these issues, and integrated energy and climate issues into the EU’s foreign and security policy considerations.

Energy security has been a key component of energy policy and informed foreign policy in Europe and the United States for decades. While different iterations or strains of energy security guided many energy-importing nation states prior to the 1970s, the spike in global oil prices due to the 1973 Arab oil embargo and later disruption due to the 1979 Iranian revolution crystallized energy security conversations in the EU and the United States around the idea of the stable and reliable hydrocarbon supply. This framing continued for decades, but it is now being upended on both sides of the Atlantic. The confluence of the EU’s efforts to reduce reliance on Russian gas supply, the United States’ rise as an oil and gas producer, and the broader ways in which the energy transition to a low carbon economy is impacting concept of energy security.

While the increased domestic oil and gas production from shale in the United States has led to a new paradigm of energy abundance, and a new framing — or at the very least catchphrase — of energy dominance, events in the European energy and security landscape have shifted the conversation toward increased integration. This includes a continued focus on the internal market and a renewed focus on the EU’s ability to “speak with one voice” when it comes to energy.

As an energy importer, the EU is reliant on external suppliers for energy, which informs past and present perceptions of energy security. Imports account for 54 percent of the EU’s total energy supply, at a price of 1
billion Euros per day, while relying on imports for 90 percent of crude oil, 69 percent of natural gas supply, and 42 percent of coal and solid fuel. While the level of reliance varies from country to country, this position has informed European energy policy for decades, and reliance on gas imports has been the key focus — and occasional flashpoint.

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Gas is a key area of import dependence as well as a challenge in the relationship between the EU and its main supplier, Russia, which also is the largest supplier of crude oil and solid fuel to the EU. Crises in 2006 and 2009, which resulted in temporary disruptions in gas supply in some eastern European countries, pointed to as a “wake up call” in the EU’s 2014 energy security strategy. These crises have informed much of the recent energy security discourse, which has focused on measures to enhance energy security through diversifying supply sources and routes. The focus on supply diversification has evolved from a seeming preference for long-term supply stability (through long-term contracts).

The EU’s position as an energy importer is significant not just for energy security, but also in understanding the EU’s relative position when it comes to climate policy and efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. As an importer of largely fossil fuels, the development of renewable energy and increasing energy efficiency bring both energy and climate benefits.

Globally, the EU-28 accounted for just 5.6 percent of global energy production in 2015, the year the Paris Agreement was signed, and is the only region where energy production has been declining since 2004. The 28 EU member states together account for just 11.9 percent of the world total energy consumption, and 10.2 percent of the world’s CO2 emissions. Reliant on imports for fossil fuel needs, cleaner sources of energy, namely renewables, could bring both climate and energy security benefits. However, this cuts both ways. Some countries with domestic coal supplies, namely Poland, prioritize the energy security benefits of domestic coal over climate policy goals to reduce carbon emissions, citing the energy security benefits.

THE ENERGY UNION: BRIDGING THE GAP?

Following Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine and attempted annexation of Crimea in March 2014, and with the supply disruptions of 2006 and 2009 still fresh in the minds of many central and eastern European states, then-Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk called for creating an “Energy Union” amongst EU member states to improve energy security and reduce dependence on Russian gas imports by leveraging their collective power. His call for a union was predicated...
on the idea that a more united Europe, and a more integrated European energy market, would reduce the leverage Russia’s state-owned energy company Gazprom enjoyed over European consumer countries. Tusk called on Europe to jointly negotiate energy contracts with Russia, instill mechanisms for guaranteeing solidarity in the event of an energy supply cut off, build energy infrastructure, make full use of European fossil fuels, and reach out to global producers and partners.10

Tusk went on to become president of the European Council, and the idea was taken up by the European Commission, which adopted the official Energy Union strategy in February 2015. However, the concept of an Energy Union as promulgated by the Commission was significantly broader than the union based on gas security or even energy security that Tusk seemed to have proposed.11 The Energy Union concept as outlined by the Commission includes five “mutually reinforcing” pillars: security, solidarity, and trust (energy security); the internal energy market; energy efficiency; decarbonization and sustainability; and research, innovation, and competitiveness.12 By including climate action along with energy security, the Commission seemed to acknowledge and institutionalize the linkage between energy and climate policy, even while maintaining two separate Directorate Generals (Energy and Climate Action) to execute them.

The formation of the Energy Union is illustrative of the nexus between traditional energy security concerns and the EU’s commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to combat global climate change and demonstrate leadership in climate diplomacy. The Energy Union is also a key framework through which the EU hopes to project a unified, external voice when it comes to energy security issues, but its incorporation of climate goals in the form of decarbonization into the Energy Union framework suggests an attempt to also speak with one voice on climate.

However, the Energy Union also exposes the rifts within the EU on both energy and climate. While member states have varying interpretations of energy security, as epitomized by the debate over the proposed Nord Stream II pipeline from Russia to Germany, they also have differing commitments to climate action—which may suggest divergent perceptions of the severity of climate risks. The struggle to operationalize the seemingly broadly appealing concepts of the Energy Union into policy and seemingly tepid support from member states also underscores some of the difficulties in merging energy security and climate policy.
While the Energy Union was catalyzed by the link between energy and security and broadened to include climate goals, the pursuit of emissions reductions and climate goals is also linked to competitiveness, suggesting a geo-economic element to efforts to reduce carbon emissions. While energy security has long been taken to mean reliable access to secure and affordable supplies of (fossil) fuels, the focus on competitiveness includes emphasis on the ability of new energy technologies to reduce emissions, spur economic growth, and “decrease reliance on external suppliers of fossil fuels.”

CONSIDERING CLIMATE SECURITY

Climate policy goals, including the pursuit of low carbon sources of energy, are related to energy security goals. When it comes to climate policy, the EU is considered — and indeed considers itself — a leader in global efforts to combat climate change. Over the last ten years, the EU has not only expanded its view of climate as a security concern, but also moved to mainstream this issue into other policy areas, including foreign policy, particularly in multilateral fora and engagements, in development and conflict prevention, and under the guise of EU Common Defense and Security Policy.

The EU’s commitment to multilateralism and conception of climate change as a threat undergirded their commitment to achieving a durable agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process. This culminated in the Paris Agreement, a success of French diplomacy and European multilateralism. The EU has also made progress in recognizing and conceptualizing the link between climate and security and identifying the associated risks and integrating climate into the EU’s foreign and security policy lexicon, even if incorporating this understanding into action across a range of policy areas has proven more difficult. Following the release of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s Fourth Assessment Report in 2007, which noted the potential for climate to impact food and water security in regions around the world, the United Nations Security Council first debated the link “between energy, security, and climate” in 2007, its “first-ever debate on the impact of climate change on security.”

This prompted the EU to take on the issue in the 2008 report, “Climate Change and International Security” by then High Representative Javier Solana, published jointly with the European Commission. The report included the since oft-repeated characterization of climate change as a “threat multiplier which exacerbates existing trends, tensions and instability” and linked climate risks to humanitarian issues, political and security risks, and to international security. The report also posited that the EU “is in a unique role to respond to the impacts...
of climate change on international security” as “the security challenge plays to Europe’s strengths, with its comprehensive approach to conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict reconstruction, and as a key proponent of effective multilateralism.”

The report outlined security risks posed by climate change, including: conflict over resources, economic damage and risk to coastal cities and critical infrastructure, loss of territory and border disputes, environmentally-induced migration, situations of fragility and radicalization, tension over energy supply, and pressure on international governance. Many of these risks were reiterated in, “A New Climate for Peace,” a seminal 2015 report commissioned by the G7 which identified seven risks, referred to as compound climate fragility risks: local resource competition, livelihood insecurity and migration, extreme weather events and disasters, volatile food prices and provisions, transboundary water management, sea level rise and coastal degradation, and unintended effects of climate policies.

The EU’s updated Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy, released in 2016, more explicitly connected the climate threat with EU external action. Under the global strategy, climate change is identified as a source of disruption, a threat to EU security, and a source of fragility against which the EU needs to build resilience. In identifying the unifying priorities of EU external action, climate change and energy risks are explicitly mentioned as part of two pillars: “The Security of Our Union” and “State and Societal Resilience to our East and South.” In acknowledging the degree to which climate can exacerbate existing risks and drivers of instability, the strategy explicitly calls for addressing climate change across multiple sectors and time scales.

One area includes support for the energy transition, called “a major challenge in surrounding regions” and doing so “in ways that do not exacerbate social tensions.” The Global Strategy recommends supporting the energy transition in the European neighborhood through “energy liberalization, renewables development, regulation and technology transfer, and climate mitigation and adaption.” Thus, the EU is continuing to operate out of its energy policy playbook, externally projecting the principles of European energy law and support for liberalization and reform as a preventive measure to reduce the potential for climate policies to cause instability.

LOOKING AHEAD: EUROPE’S CLIMATE SECURITY CHALLENGES

Having spent the last decade articulating the relationship between climate and security, the EU must address the broader challenge of how to integrate climate security concerns into its early warning systems and conflict prevention measures, humanitarian response and migration work, and broader foreign and security policy. While there are a host of pressing climate risks, the challenge of managing the energy transition and its geopolitical ramifications and the potential for climate-related risks to spur or contribute to migration in fragile states in the European neighborhood are two key areas the EU should consider given its geographic location and proximity to areas in the Middle East and North Africa which would potentially be affected by these phenomena.

According to the EU Global Strategy, the EU “will seek to enhance energy and environmental resilience” into its strategy and conflict prevention measures, and calls the energy transition a major challenge in the EU’s surrounding region and broader neighborhood which “must be properly managed to avoid fueling social tensions.” This could draw on the EU’s experience in building an internal market and undertaking its own energy transition (and continue the extension of EU rules and norms outward), but it also raises questions about the implications of the energy transition for countries in the EU’s backyard.

The impact the energy transition on fossil fuel demand and thus on producing countries, particularly countries that rely on the revenue from fossil fuel sales is a major unknown. While there are many countries for whom this question looms large, Russia may be the nearest — and most relevant — of the EU’s neighbors for which this could be a concern. The EU is Russia’s largest gas market, with Germany as the single largest consumer, and nearly 70 percent of Russia’s crude oil exports went to European countries in 2016. While traditionally thought of under the guise of energy security, serious efforts by the EU to dramatically decrease fossil fuel consumption would have an impact on Russia, where oil and gas revenue accounted for 36 percent of federal revenue in 2016. Even small reductions in demand could impact the volume and price of sales and resulting revenue. The vulnerability of the Russian economy
to global energy prices — and potential shifts in the energy system — can be seen in the economic crises in 1997, 2008, and 2014, which intersected with declines in global oil prices. These impacts might not remain limited to the Russian economy. Reduced revenue on the one hand could hamper Russia’s capacity to engage in foreign adventures abroad and in the European neighborhood. It could also drive the government, however, to focus on external engagement to focus domestic attention elsewhere and rally Russians around the flag. Other hydrocarbon producers have begun to acknowledge the threat over-reliance on hydrocarbon revenue poses for their future (even if all do not explicitly acknowledge the role of climate policy). For example, many of the Gulf Cooperation Council hydrocarbon producing countries have outlined explicit “visions” or plans for economic diversification in light of the risks of reliance on oil and gas revenue. While the pace and extent of changes in energy consumption patterns and demand are uncertain, new debates over the concept of “lower for longer” oil prices suggest that a change in thinking is underway. Changes in vehicle technology and announcements like the Chinese government’s intention to phase out combustion engines, and new discussions about the idea of a “peak” in oil demand suggest that the world is shifting under fossil fuel producers’ feet. The degree to which Europe is successful in both promoting the energy transition, and doing so in a socially sustainable way to manage potential social and political upheaval, will influence the size and impact of these shifts.

In addition to being home to a handful of oil and gas revenue reliant economies, the European neighborhood, including the Mediterranean, Middle East, and North Africa, is considered highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and potential climate-related migration is frequently cited as a key climate risk. This risk is thought to be higher in fragile states, as the report, A New Climate for Peace, pointed out, climate change can exacerbate existing risks particularly in fragile states “where institutions and governments are unable to manage the stress or absorb the shocks of a changing climate.” According to the Fragile State Index, each of the sixteen countries in the European Neighborhood Program are at a “warning” level or higher. Syria was determined to be the fifth most fragile state in the world in 2017, while Libya ranked twenty-third. The relationship between fragility and conflict in these states, as well as the ensuing dislocation, has been at the heart of the European debate over migration in recent years.

While it appears inconclusive whether there is a link between drought and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, and between climate change and the drought experienced there, it certainly raises questions about the capacity of fragile states in the European neighborhood to cope with climate related disasters or extreme weather events, should they occur in the future. The discussion over any potential relationship between the drought, climate change, and conflict also underscores the extreme difficulty in teasing out these relationships to incorporating climate into conflict prevention.

In light of the disagreement between and within EU member states over refugees and the debate over shouldering collective responsibility versus the unwillingness of some states to engage in what they “burden sharing,” the degree to which migration can impact EU stability is clear. Moreover, the added layer of complication that could be added in the future should the question of responsibility toward communities displaced by climate change could add yet more strain given the lack of a global framework. Ultimately, while the EU has gone beyond most governments in explicitly acknowledging the relationship between energy and climate and between climate and security, the difficulty is in operationalizing this and addressing these links in a way that member states can implement—and agree on.

3 An often-repeated phrase, it was said by Energy Commission Gunther Oettinger in referring to the EU’s energy policy both internally and externally in dealing with...
energy relations with third countries in 2011.


7 EU Energy in Figures - Statistical Pocketbook 2017, 10.

8 EU Energy in Figures - Statistical Pocketbook 2017, 14, 18.


17 Ibid., 2.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 3-5.


22 Ibid., 9.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.


26 Ibid.


28 The “rally ‘round the flag effect” is a political science concept whereby domestic groups will unite in the face of common threats or external enemies, while the diversionary theory of war holds that the negative implication of this effect is that leaders or politicians could intentionally create an external crisis or diversion to deflect attention from difficult conditions at home.


31 New Climate for Peace, Adelphi, Wilson Center, and European Institute for Security Studies.


33 Countries in the European Neighborhood Program include Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Republic of Moldova, Morocco, Syria, Palestine, Tunisia, and Ukraine.

34 The Fund for Peace, “Fragile State Index.”


36 See the following for an in-depth exploration—and rejection—of the claim that the Syrian drought was linked to climate change and a major factor in the civil war: Jan Selby, Omar S. Dah, Christiane Froehlich, Mike Hulme, “Climate Change and the Syrian Civil War Revisited,” Political Geography 60 (September 2017): 232-244 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0962629816301822> (accessed March 4, 2018).

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