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Why going green is the answer to the West's security dilemma

The war in Ukraine exposed Europe's energy dependency — and showed that the transition to clean energy is a global security imperative

A few days before President Biden announced the US embargo on Russian oil and gas, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its latest report – which found that despite efforts to reduce risks, climate change is causing dangerous and widespread disruptions and affecting the lives of billions of people worldwide. UN Secretary General Antonio Gutierrez termed the report 'an atlas of human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership.'

However, the report's grim findings were mostly pushed out of the headlines by another grim development – the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Yet the two stories are not actually separate. One of the most potent advantages Putin has in the conflict is Europe's dependence on oil and gas – and it's precisely that dependence, if continued, that is contributing to the dire outcomes of which the IPCC warned. The current crisis provides a moment for the world to address all of these risks by moving more quickly toward clean energy – if the world is bold enough to take it.

The connection between security and climate

Since taking office in January 2021, Biden has put tackling climate change front and centre in his administration and foreign policy. His Special Envoy John Kerry has travelled the world, pushing countries to raise their ambitions to move away from fossil fuels more rapidly. Biden has penned multiple executive orders, directing US federal agencies to integrate climate analysis into their work and to decarbonise the US federal government by 2050.

In part, he's doing this because the national security implications of a warming planet are serious. As the US Defence Department warned in its Climate Risk Analysis report late last year, 'The unprecedented scale of wildfires, floods, droughts, typhoons, and other extreme weather events of recent months and years have damaged our installations and bases, constrained force readiness and operations, and contributed to instability around the world.'

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Much of Europe shares the climate security concerns of the United States. Last June, NATO adopted a Climate Change and Security Action Plan, calling climate change one of the 'defining challenges of our time', noting it is a 'threat multiplier' that makes carrying out military tasks more difficult and will 'exacerbate state fragility, fuel conflicts, and lead to displacement…creating conditions that can be exploited by state and non-state actors that threaten or challenge the Alliance.'

None of those security threats have disappeared because Russia invaded Ukraine. Instead, the brutal invasion has underscored the systemic nature of the risks posed by continued global reliance on fossil fuels. Not only did Russian dominance of the European oil and gas market constrain the initial EU response, attempts to fill the gap left by turning off the Russian spigot has driven US engagement with other authoritarian regimes in Venezuela and the Middle East, undermining the Biden Administration's democracy agenda.

While experts have long warned that the global energy transition away from oil and gas would upend international politics and create new winners and losers – less has been said about the systemic security benefits of the transition. These co-benefits have become crystal clear in the last few weeks, however. In addition to preventing the most catastrophic security outcomes from climate change, a more rapid move to clean energy would also pull the rug out from under petro-dictators like Putin.

Moving towards clean energy won't be easy

This is not to say a more rapid move to clean energy is a risk-free path. Leaving aside the domestic political questions facing the United States and Europe regarding high fuel prices and home heating costs, the

geopolitical reality is that countries with economies rooted in oil will not go down without a fight.

As a 2021 report from the International Energy Association noted, 'energy transitions can be volatile and disjointed affairs, characterised by competing interests and stop-go policies'. Similarly the 2021 US National Intelligence Estimate on climate security risks reported, 'most countries that rely on fossil fuel exports to support their budgets will continue to resist a quick transition to a zero-carbon world because they fear the…costs of doing so.'

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Adding to the volatility and risks of instability in fossil fuel dependent countries are the impacts of climate change itself. A report from Russia's own environment ministry in 2015 found the country was warming 2.5 times faster on average than the rest of the globe. The US and its allies are tracking the risks of this warming. In a January press conference, Biden warned Putin that his real problem was, 'a burning tundra that will not freeze again naturally.' As Arctic ice melts, Russia will lose its natural defence of its northern border, potentially leading to more aggressive behaviour by Moscow in the region as it increases its military presence there.

The hard truth is none of these dynamics are going to get easier to manage over time. As anyone who has ever delayed ripping off a band aid knows, the longer we wait, the slower we go, the harder and more painful it gets. Over the past few weeks leaders in the United States and Europe have shown the ability to do hard things previously thought unimaginable – from halting Nord Stream 2to cutting off Russian oil and gas to rallying the entire EU behind direct military support to Ukraine. At the same time, creative, bold ideas for transitioning to clean energy are surfacing and gaining traction in the halls of government – such as a proposal to invoke the US Defence Production Act to manufacture thousands of heat pumps to keep Europeans warm next winter.

Moments of unprecedented upheaval and crisis can lead to moments of clarity about the future – in this case, the recognition that speeding the transition to clean energy is a security imperative.



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