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Conflict, cooperation, and change in the politics of energy interdependence: An introduction[☆]Mark T. Nance^{*}, William A. Boettcher III

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ABSTRACT

This article lays out the core insights of the group of papers included in this special issue. It lays out the logic of the project and highlights how an energy and security approach to energy policy—as opposed to one emphasizing “energy security through energy independence”—shifts our perspective on likely energy policy.

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Editors' note: This special issue of Energy Research and Social Science is a bit of an experiment. As co-directors of the Energy and Security Initiative at North Carolina State University, our aim is to promote a research agenda on the ways in which the production and consumption of energy affects human and national security. Toward that end, with the support of an International Studies Association workshop grant and from the Kenan Institute for Engineering, Technology & Science at NC State, we hosted an initial workshop at an ISA meeting with one central task. Participants would use whatever tools we normally use for political analysis and apply them to a research question that takes the link between energy and security as a central concern, i.e., takes an energy-related topic as our independent and/or dependent variable. Some would consider themselves energy experts; others would not. We would derive policy implications from those analyses. After a successful workshop and with the help of ERSS editor Benjamin Sovacool, we circulated a call for more papers to complete this special issue of Energy Research and Social Science. To help us judge the experiment, we asked two life-long policy practitioners to comment along the way. As they explain it, their careers have not been as “policy makers” but as “policy implementers.” They have careers that include various posts

throughout the US State Department, with international governmental organizations related to energy and non-proliferation, as researchers and teachers, and as private consultants. They provided commentary at the original workshop that spawned this project. We have included their final impressions here as a conclusion. As such, this special issue in some ways is not a “normal” social science product. We have asked contributors to be concise, limit citations only to those necessary, and push themselves to derive policy implications from their research. Likewise, this introduction does not aim to make an original research contribution, nor is it meant to be a review of the “state-of-the-art,” as many special issue introductions are. We aim instead to delineate the gap that we see in existing research avenues and which we hope this special issue helps narrow. We highlight a few important themes that we believe the papers, taken as a whole, bring forward. And we aim to whet the appetite of readers so that they will read, consider, and engage the articles included here. We trust readers will join in this experiment by reading this special issue in this spirit.

1. Energy, energy security, or energy and security? A research/policy gap

Social scientists for a long time have worked to understand the many aspects of energy production and consumption. Energy still does not receive the attention it deserves on the pages of journals or course syllabi, but social scientists have considered the environmental impact, the economic costs and benefits, the social implications, and the geopolitical repercussions, to name just a

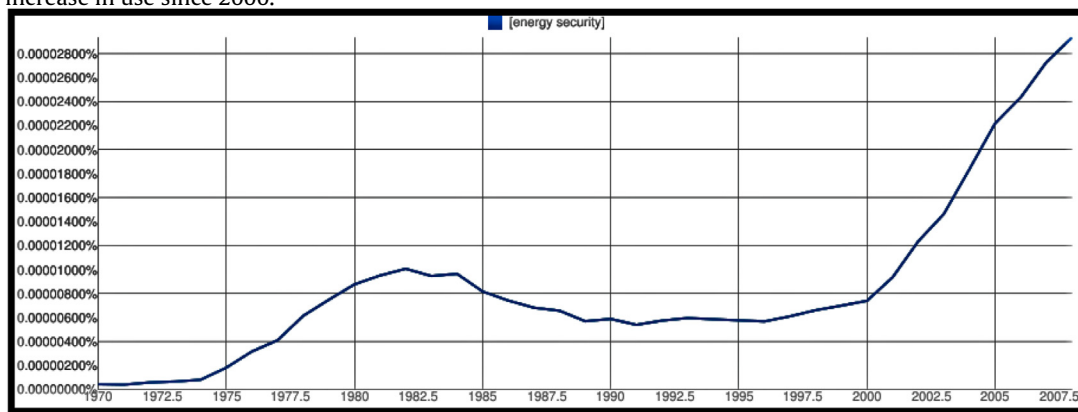
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few common topics.¹ The kinds of questions analysts address are shaped by world events.² The OPEC oil embargo in 1973 led to the creation of the Department of Energy in the United States. Scholars began more seriously studying energy and its national strategic implications. The fall of the Soviet Union disrupted traditional supplier relations within the US and Soviet spheres of influence, as well as the pre-existing nuclear security regimes. Scholars therefore began thinking about the viability of a common pool of the materials needed for nuclear energy production. The effects of climate change became visible through acid rain and forest dieback, the environmental movement became a factor politically, and social scientists analyzed its impact.

This special issue of *Energy Research and Social Science* finds its focus in the increasing emphasis on “energy security.” Made popular initially in response to the oil crises of the 1970s, it has taken on new life in the 2000s. Consider the following chart, produced using Google Books Ngram Viewer, which tracks the usage of a word or phrase in a sample of 5.2 million books from Google’s library of 15 million.³ Even readers of this journal, who are very familiar with the term “energy security,” may still be surprised by the term’s striking increase in use since 2000.



Readers of *ERSS* also have a rough idea of what “energy security” means. There seems to be a broad area of consensus around the IEA’s conceptualization of energy security as “the reliable supply of energy at an affordable price.” Beyond that, however, there is considerable debate, especially regarding the measurement of central concepts.⁴ This conceptual cloudiness has allowed energy security to become an “umbrella term” for a variety of policies and policy goals, many of which conflict with one another.⁵

As analysts focused largely on political phenomena, we are struck in particular by the gulf we perceive as separating that academic consensus from political discourse on the topic. Energy and energy security are current topics in political circles, because it is an exciting time for energy policy. The hydrofracturing (i.e., frack-

ing) revolution for some seems a magic bullet that promises energy security at affordable prices, while others see it as the new alchemy and fear its greatest impact will be environmental degradation. Concerns about scarcity continue to mount as experts argue that the end of conventional oil supplies is in sight. The human and political impact of that shift would be unparalleled. An aggressive Russian foreign policy seems undergirded by Russia’s relative strength in energy markets and European dependence on Russian resources. The election of Donald Trump in the US heightened fears of an aggressive Russia. Intensifying all of these reactions is the rising pressure on limited energy supplies and on the environment generated as non-OECD economic development intensifies the environmental degradation that OECD energy consumption set in motion.

As Sovacool has noted, however, politicians are quick to talk about energy security, but loathe to define it.⁶ So what do politicians mean when they say it and how do they understand the term differently than do academic experts? It is, of course, impossible to generalize to all politicians who have talked about “energy

security,” as we discuss below. We believe it is accurate, however, to argue that policy makers focus more than most academics on the strategic aspects of energy production and consumption. For example, the academic work cited above as debating the conceptualization and measurement of energy security still seems built largely on assumptions of global production and consumption. The policy questions then become how to ensure the resilience of energy markets, promote the discovery and distribution of diverse energy sources, and mitigate environmental degradation and negative social impact. For many of these observers, properly functioning global markets mean greater flexibility, resilience, innovation, and efficiency. In short, global markets mean greater energy security.

In contrast, the political discourse around energy more often treats energy interdependence as problematic.⁷ Relying on other countries for energy, even on allies, makes us vulnerable to disruptions in supply.⁸ Some of those disruptions, e.g., maritime piracy, could be non-strategic; the driver of the disruption is not its polit-

¹ See the call for greater attention by scholars studying International Political Economy found in: Hancock, Kathleen J. and Vlado Vivoda. 2014. “International political economy: A field born of the OPEC crisis returns to its energy roots.” *Energy Research & Social Science* 1: 206–216.

² Cherp, Aleh and Jessica Jewell. 2011. “The three perspectives on energy security: intellectual history, disciplinary roots and the potential for integration.” *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 3: 202–212.

³ For more information on this, see: books.google.com/ngrams.

⁴ We do not intend to provide a review of this debate here. For guides to that debate, however, see: Sovacool, Benjamin K. and Ishani Mukherjee. 2011. “Conceptualizing and measuring energy security: A synthesized approach.” *Energy* 36: 5343–5355; Kruty, Bert, D.P. van Vuuren, H.J.M. de Vries, and H. Groenenberg. 2009. “Indicators for energy security.” *Energy Policy* 37: 2166–2181; Winzer, Christian. 2012. “Conceptualizing energy security.” *Energy Policy* 46: 36–48; Sovacool, Benjamin K. and Marilyn A. Brown. 2010. “Competing Dimensions of Energy Security: An International Perspective.” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 35: 77–108.

⁵ Winzer 2010, *supra* n. 4.

⁶ Sovacool, Benjamin K. 2010. “Introduction: Defining, measuring, and exploring energy security” in Sovacool (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Energy Security*. London: Routledge. Pp. 2–3.

⁷ Cohen, Gail, Frederick Joutz, Prakash Loungani. 2011. “Measuring energy security: Trends in the diversification of oil and natural gas supplies.” *Energy Policy* 39: 4860–4869.

⁸ See Loungani’s review of books that make this argument: Loungani, Prakash. 2009. “The elusive quest for energy independence.” *International Finance* 12(2): 291–299.

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