

Exploring Energy Interdependence: An Analysis of Russia's Energy Leverage on Germany in the Ukraine Crisis

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Abstract

It was believed that closed Europe-Russia energy cooperation would be a bridge to incorporate Russia into the pan-Europe security architecture, while it was at the same time concerned to be Russia's leverage and wedge to exert influences and to divide Europe. The latter concern prevailed amidst the Ukraine Crisis and the deterioration of Europe-Russia relation. The Ukraine Crisis will be used as a case study to test both the belief and the concerns, for if energy cooperation and reliance, or strategic natural resources reliance more broadly, has influences on foreign policy formulations, particularly in contexts of deteriorating bilateral relations. The research question is: Does Germany-Russia energy cooperation influences Germany's foreign policies change since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict? And how? The research examines the dynamics of Germany-Russia energy cooperation and Germany's foreign policies in the Ukraine Crisis, for if its closed energy ties with Russia led to its political concession during the Russia-Ukraine War. The research indicates a strong correlation between high energy dependence and conservative foreign policy stances before core interests were threatened. This correlation weakens but persists after the threatening of core interests. The findings verify the role of energy reliance or strategic resources reliance in foreign policy formulations, and have potentials to be applied to great power competitions, such as US-China relation, which is also strategically interdependent.

Keywords

Energy Interdependence; Germany-Russia Relations; Foreign Policy Analysis.

1. Introduction

Before and after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War in February 2022- the most significant reconfiguration of the European security order since WWII-Germany was criticized for being too close towards Russia. It was criticized as adopting a new policy of appeasement, with "a whiff of Munich" ^[1]. Former German foreign minister and the current German President, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, admitted "a bitter failure of years of political efforts" ^[2] to prevent the war, in a speech in October 2022, and he admitted in March 2022 the mistake of "his adherence to Nord Stream 2" ^[3] and over-reliance on Russian energy imports. Steinmeier had defended the pipeline before the war, arguing that energy cooperation was "one of the last bridges between Russia and Europe" ^[3], that might have helped to achieve peace. He eventually recognized that the Russia-Ukraine War "marked the final failure" ^[4] of this policy.

The War led to a reversal of Germany's foreign policy towards Russia ^[1]. The onset of war also marked a significant decrease in Germany-Russia energy cooperation. Russia decreased gas deliveries to Germany dramatically and Germany imposed significant restrictions on Russia's coal and oil exports ^[4]. The approval process of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline was stopped on the eve of the Russia-Ukraine War ^[5]. The dynamics of energy cooperation set stages for research on its leverage and influences on foreign policies.

The decreasing energy cooperation caused a significant supply shortage and the increase of energy prices, which exacerbated Europe's economy slowdown for a period of time ^[4]. The sudden and "messy" energy "divorce" ^[5] between Germany and Russia exposes problems of Russia's growing energy leverage and Europe's fragile "asymmetrical interdependence" ^[6] on its geopolitical adversary. It exposed that Germany has not prepared well for the potential risks of this interdependence, which has been a consistent problem that has been warned inside and outside of Germany, especially after the 2014 Crimea Crisis.

The prevailing warnings suggest that energy interdependence could confront Germany with a strategic dilemma, forcing a difficult trade-off between economic interests and political principles. Energy interdependence is regarded as a potential driver of Germany's foreign policy concessions, which may erode its initiatives during future crises in responding to Russia's imperialism ambitions, particularly considering Russia's repeated usages of its energy leverage for political needs. It is also regarded as a wedge that may create divisions within Europe. However, the warnings have been ignored and did not affect the consistent and relative high-level energy cooperation between Germany and Russia, except for few sanctions and restrictions.

This research explores the influence of Germany-Russia energy cooperation in Germany's foreign policies dynamic during the Ukraine Crisis. More specifically, it responds to the question: Does Germany-Russia energy cooperation influences Germany's foreign policies change since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict? And How?

It would contribute to foreign policy analysis and crisis management in great power competition. The research will explain how economic ties and strategic resources reliance influence foreign policy formulation. Germany presents a compelling case for the research, since Russia stands as a pivotal energy supplier to the state. High level of independence theoretically mean it is more vulnerable and are more likely to make political concessions, and the research will test the empirically test the theoretical hypothesis and contribute to influencing factors in foreign policy formulations, using the example of Germany.

The relationship that characterized by a blend of mutual dependence and rivalry, is an epitome of the contemporary great power competition, such as US and China, which commonly includes a pair of intimate adversaries that being strategically interdependent and experience both 'breaches and bridges' ^[2]. The research will analyze the influences of intimate energy or strategy ties on foreign policy towards adversary in the crisis, which contributes to crisis management and sets precedents for dealing with interdependence in great power competition.

This research project will use an empirical qualitative approach. The time frame of this project will be from December 2021, several months before the war started until the end of 2024 when the war enters a white-hot stage and the Germany-Russia energy cooperation was severely affected by the Russia-Ukraine War. The independent variables for this case study will be different degrees of Germany-Russia energy cooperation, measured by the volume of gas imports from Russia and its percentages of the total usages of the state. The dependent variables will be Germany's foreign policy changes in the Ukraine Crisis, measured by information from three different channels, official documents and meetings, leaders' speeches and phone calls and news reports. The coverage of major channels contributes to capturing foreign policy changes from different perspectives for a more comprehensive understanding, but will be integrated in chronological order for analysis to show how independent and dependent variables change over time and the relationship between them. The news reports will include major English newsagents, such as BBC News, New York Times, Reuters and so on, and several major German newsagents may also be included.

The research demonstrates that before the threatening of core interest, states with significant energy or strategic resources reliance more broadly, exhibit a conservative tendency in foreign

policy formulation. However, the leverage of the reliance diminishes after the direct threatening of states' core interests, as Russia's start of military action in Ukraine. The deterioration and complication of the situation leads to the emergence of other more important leverages. Although the leverage decreases, the correlation between reliance and foreign policies remains evident.

However, the influences should not be overestimated. The interdependence leverage may not be as influential as it appears, as what will be discussed. It might be feasible to apply the conclusion to other great power competitions with cautious, such as China and the US relation.

2. Literature Review

The current depth of Germany-Russia energy cooperation was not achieved overnight, but rather evolved through a discernible process of gradual intensification. The energy cooperation has experienced a process before being so closed. Until early 2010s, Germany-Russia energy cooperation remained at a relatively low level compared to its succeeding development, while has had an expanding trend. Russia's energy influence is constrained mainly in former Soviet Republics and Baltic States in this period. Between 2010 and 2020, Germany-Russia energy cooperation obviously deepened and widened, with construction of the Nord Stream projects and the signing of long-term contracts or memorandum of cooperation ^[7], notwithstanding consistent warnings and concerns. Simultaneously, there are increasing disagreements and strategic conflicts between Russia and Germany with Russia's exposure of ambitions in mainly East Europe, such as the Georgian War, Russia's annexation of Crimea and so on. It leads to increasing concerns on Germany's geopolitical and energy security.

Compared to traditional geopolitical strategy that is "overt, military and confrontational" ^[8], Russia's energy policy is summarized as geo-economic strategy, which is a concept proposed by Edward Luttwak. It is "more subtle and easier to conceal" ^[8], which leads to few arguments on depoliticizing energy cooperation, for example Casier argues Russia-Europe energy cooperation is "predominantly economic and commercial" ^[9]. Siddi is also optimistic that the cooperation may follow a realist "commercial logic" ^[10]. However, the argument that energy policy is "much more a politicized issue" ^[11], although was "portrayed as a business decision", gradually become the predominant view in this period, especially with construction of the Nord Stream pipelines.

Literature centers on whether energy interdependence could foster peace and mutual understanding between Russia and Germany, and Europe as a whole. Whist mentions the assumption that the Nord Stream pipeline may deepen interdependence and create harmony in Europe ^[12]. Sabbaghian and Rasooli believe that the energy variable would "prevent spilling over the problems to other areas" and sustain relationships between Russia and Europe ^[13].

However, Krickovic dispels the notions of the "pacif effects of interdependence" ^[14], and he argues that energy cooperation, instead of providing security, are more likely to create a security dilemma and exacerbate tensions. The dilemma, he argues, stems from an exclusive focus on energy and a lack of complex interdependence, thereby prompting both Europe and Russia to seek approaches to reduce their own dependency, while simultaneously attempting to gain strategic leverage and autonomy by increasing the other side's reliance ^[14]. It aligns with Lutwak's doubts towards the liberal hypothesis in the post-Cold War era, that increasing interdependence would reduce strategic conflicts, instead he argues that geo-economic approaches would rise to serve for continuing competitions for comparative power and geostrategic motivation ^[8].

Despite the divergent attitudes towards interdependence theory, there is a consensus that Europe should reduce its energy dependence on Russia. Energy diversification and concerns on

energy security have been a recurring theme ^[11] in discussion from 2010 to 2020. However, Germany and Europe as a whole failed to both prevent large-scale military conflict in Europe and prevent the contemporary energy crisis, and its energy policies and foreign policies behind the failure need to be examined. Existing scholarship on Russia's energy leverage largely predates the full-scale war in Ukraine. Consequently, the profound reassessment necessitated by this geopolitical rupture remains sparse, leaving a critical gap in understanding the mechanisms and efficacy of such leverage in the contemporary setting.

3. Germany-Russia Energy Cooperation

Germany was "Russia's largest gas customer by volume", "importing nearly twice the volume" of the second largest customer, Italy ^[5]. Over thirty percent of Germany's oil, about fifty percent of coal and above fifty percent of gas ^[5] was imported from Russia before the war. It is also a key actor of the Nord Stream pipeline projects and held this "bridge" ^[15] until the eve of the war. According to the data from BDEW, German Association of Energy and Water Industries, natural gas imported from Russia accounts for about 35 percent of total gas usages in Germany in January 2022 and stayed stable until May 2022 ^[16], which was not immediately affected by the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War in February. The Chancellor of Germany, Scholz resisted firmly that an immediate embargo of Russian energy may "trigger an economic crisis" ^[17] in March 2022, and his administration set the timeline to mid-2024 to wean itself off Russian's energy ^[18], which was commented as "a hugely ambitious plan" ^[18] that will "pose complex logistical hurdles" ^[18] for Germany's economy. It poses Germany's over-dependence and provided Russia with opportunities to exercise its energy leverage by supply disruptions.

In June 2022, Russia cut down gas deliveries through the Nord Stream I pipeline by 75 percent, from 170m cubic metres per day to about 40m cubic metres, which was publicly attributed to Canadian sanctions and technical issues with the pipelines ^[4]. However, it was widely perceived as a signal of Moscow's dissatisfaction and a deliberate warning, following the outbreak of the war. The cut down precipitated an obvious decline in the share of Russian gas imports to 36.2 percent in June 2022 ^[16]. Russia ended gas deliveries for ten days in July and decreased deliveries further to 20 cubic metres after the restoration ^[4], which precipitated to more than a half decrease of percentage in July to only 10.1 percent ^[16]. On 31 August, G7 reached the agreement on "imposing the price cap on Russian oil" ^[5], which sets the price ceiling for Russian oil exports. On the same day, as a response, Russia announced to indefinitely ended gas deliveries through the Nord Stream pipeline using the excuse of maintenance ^[4]. It was the time when Germany's natural gas imports from Russia that has lasted for more than a decade was ended passively and has not been restored until now. Then, the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines on 26 September further increased the technical challenges and rendered the restoration virtually impossible.

Russia's gas supply disruption was described as a weapon in this "economic attack" ^[15], announced by Germany Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck. It is obvious that Germany and the whole Europe has not prepared well, and the "messy divorce" ^[5] caused panic in European energy market, following by a dramatic increase of energy prices. In June, Germany national alert was raised to "stage two of its three-stage alert system" partly due to energy shortages ^[15]. According to research conducted by the UK Parliament, on 24 February 2022, the day of the outbreak of the war, the price of Brent crude reaches over 100 dollars a barrel, which is the first time in the recent seven years, and the prices of gas increased by 50 percent and the increasing trend continues ^[19], which severely affected households and industries and imposed threats to European economic slowdowns ^[4].

While exposing vulnerabilities, Russia's exercise of energy leverage during the war also revealed a degree of resilience of Germany's energy market. After several months' panic, although Germany still faced a difficult situation, attitudes towards energy security turned to be positive. Chancellor Scholz in November 2022 announced "energy security is guaranteed" ^[20] for winter with full gas storage. The gas and oil prices fell and remained stable to a relatively normal level that are similar to the prices before the war ^[19], which benefits from alternative suppliers in global energy market and alternative transit routes like LNG.

The examination of the "energy divorce" process indicates both the vulnerability and resilience of German energy market. As most literature predicted, Russia's energy leverage has placed Europe in a passive dilemma that is created by Europe itself. For a certain period of time after the outbreak of the war, it needs to choose between importing Russian energy to finance its war in Ukraine and cutting the energy connection but swallowing the bitter pill of energy shortage or crisis. However, Germany relatively successful management of the energy shortage proves the constraints of Russia's energy leverage. Although Germany provides Russia with opportunities to "exert influence over the market" ^[21], the influences are proved to be limited because of the "complex, fragmented and competitive" ^[21] of the energy market.

Russia's energy leverage serves for its political needs, and Germany's foreign policies changes should be examined for if the energy leverage has caused political concessions.

4. Germany's Foreign Policies in the crisis

German foreign policies can be divided into two major periods, before the war started and after. The war led to Germany's foreign policies U-turn [22] and the magnitudes of energy's leverage forces are different.

Before the war started, Germany was criticized for its passivity and reluctance to act in response to both the escalating crisis on Ukraine's border and the proactive measures taken by its NATO allies. In January 2022, the New York Times published an article that questions Germany's position in the Ukraine Standoff because of its "evident hesitation to take forceful measures" [23]. The article argues Germany's hesitation would harm its reputations and would raise concerns on its reliability as an ally, and it would "encourage Russian aggression" [23] and provide a wedge to harm Europe and NATO's solidarity [23].

Most NATO members "bulk up their military commitments" [23] by sending troops or weapons to East Europe or to Ukraine directly in January, but Germany has been derided for supplying 5,000 military helmets [24]. Latvia's defense minister derided that German deterrence was to send a field hospital instead of weapons to Ukraine [23]. Although there are growing calls that Germany should "take on a more substantial military role" [25], Scholz has persisted not to send weapons to Ukraine until 6 February, citing Germany's longstanding position to avoid exporting arms to conflict areas [25]. Although energy cooperation may play a role in the refusal, it is difficult to judge how many influences it actually has, considering the complex reasons underlying, such as its struggles in the memory of WWII, its traditional ties with Russia and so on.

Besides the refusal of weapons aids, Scholz opposed the SWIFT ban against Russian banks and concerned it would harm German economy [23] because of closed Germany-Russia economic ties. The SWIFT ban may lead to "high risks" [26] that Germany would not import "gas or raw materials" [26] from Russia, according to German Finance Minister [26].

The ambiguity of Chancellor Scholz's stance was further highlighted in his government's controversial refusal to play its most obvious card, halting the Nord Stream II pipeline project [25].

Although Germany Foreign Minister Spokesman defended it as "strategic ambiguity" [25] that put all options on the table instead of using them, it is obvious that energy cooperation with Russia harmed German autonomy and reliability in this period and created divisions within the NATO. Scholz in January has repeatedly warned Moscow that the price of a military intervention would be high, however, Germany's reluctance to take forceful measures causes skepticisms that what the prices would be and caused criticisms of "being canny or weak and hesitant" [25]. It poses the paradox of modern Germany that should take more leadership responsibility but is not ready for it [23], and the energy reliance clearly serves as one of the obstructions that has constrained Germany's foreign policies options to some extents.

The signal of the turn happened on 22 February, just two days before Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine, Germany surprisingly announced the halt of the Nord Stream II, following by Russia's recognition of two Eastern Ukrainian territories as independent. The actual turning point happened on 27 February, three days after the war, German chancellor Scholz delivered a famous policy statement in Bundestag, German federal parliament, as a response to Russia's "invasion". He used the term "Zeitenwende", turning point in history, to describe the war, and announced a series of policies to respond to the watershed era, which arguably marks "one of the biggest shifts in Germany post-war foreign policies" (BBC News). The policies include a 113 billion dollars spending increase on Germany army, the promise to increase defense spending to over 2 percent of GDP, a ban of weapon exports regulations, the commitments to directly send weapons to Ukraine and so on [27]. It is regarded as a fundamental modification of German long-standing Russian policy and defense policy after WWII, which is "unthinkable a week ago" [1].

Although it was positively interpreted as the sign of Germany's return as an active geopolitical participant. it should be noticed that Germany-Russia energy cooperation was not substantially affected during this period and Scholz rejected US and Ukraine's advocates to ban Russian gas and oil, and he stated the efforts to find alternative energy suppliers cannot be achieved overnight [15].

Germany's subsequent foreign policy, moving in lockstep with the still-close energy cooperation with Russia, was characterized by its slow and hesitant nature, which stood in stark contrast to the uncompromising posture proclaimed in Scholz's speech. The commitments of increasing military spending are softening, and the delivery of heavy weapons to Ukraine slowed in April. Scholz defended it by the narrative of "coordinating with allies instead of acting unilaterally" [28], but it is regarded to "cast a cloud of doubt over the Zeitenwende and its spirit" [28]. The Zeitenwende and its successive development is an epitome of "Berlin Elite's Ukraine Dilemma" [28], which represents the disparity between Germany's rhetorical assertiveness and its deliberately measured pace. Therefore, the energy leverage still exists, although the leverage force of it cannot be accurately calculated.

Beginning in May, a marked hardening in Germany's foreign policy towards Russia unfolded in tandem with a steady decline in the level of bilateral energy cooperation. Germany accelerated weapon deliveries to Ukraine and Scholz visited Kiev in June, with French president and Italian Prime Minister, to demonstrate Europe's solidarity and supports to Ukraine [29]. Germany with other EU states "granted Ukraine and Moldova candidate EU member status" [17] a few days later. German military aids to Ukraine increased constantly and its accumulating committed military aids to Ukraine becomes the second largest in the world, behind the US, from January 2022 to November 2023 [30]. It coincided with Russia's initiation of natural gas supply disruption, precipitating a substantial contraction in Germany-Russia energy cooperation, until Russia cut off energy supply entirely on August 31 [4].

The sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines on 26 September has not only presented formidable technical challenges to their potential restart but also occurred within a political climate that is

fundamentally inhospitable to the restoration of such energy cooperation. It leads to predictably unrecoverable of energy cooperation in the near future. After which, German foreign policy become tougher and signed a bilateral security agreement with Ukraine in February 2024 (the Agreement on security cooperation and long-term support between Germany and Ukraine, 2024). Although facing criticisms of escalating tensions, Germany and the US reached an agreement to “send American long-range missiles to Germany” (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024). It signals a shift of Europe’s cautious attitude for “long-range ground-launched system” [31]. It indicates Germany started to take initiatives and implement tougher stances politically and militarily, after the predictably unrecoverable of energy cooperation with Russia.

5. Findings and Applications:

High interdependence does not permanently prevent conflict but rather raises its stakes and shapes its initial phases. The Russia-Ukraine War served as a watershed moment in the ongoing crisis, compelling a strategic recalibration across the region and fundamentally altering the dynamics of energy leverage. The initial period of the Russia-Ukraine war saw energy-reliant states like Germany grappling with this very dilemma, caught between the immediate pressure to act and the structural constraints of their own energy systems. Although the degrees of the leverage cannot be accurately calculated, energy reliance accounts for a considerable proportion in foreign policies, despite the existence and influences of other factors, for example traditional ties, distinct political traditions and so on. Due to the multifaceted nature of foreign policy making, it is almost impossible to disentangle the effects of energy dependence from other contributing factors.

The outbreak of the war prompted fundamental foreign policy re-orientations across European states. As the crisis deteriorated, other geopolitical variables gained greater salience in foreign policy formulation, thereby complicating the operational environment for energy leverage and significantly eroding its force. The research suggests that energy interdependence remains a factor in strategic calculus in foreign policy formulation after a critical juncture, however diminished. Although conclusive evidence for a direct causal link remains elusive, the consistent observation of a positive correlation, suggests a statistically significant relationship that merits serious consideration.

The findings offer a transferable lens for examining other great power rivalries, such as the U.S.-China competition, which is frequently seen as destined for confrontation according to the Thucydides Trap. Conversely, the precedent of extensive interdependence, encompassing strategic resources, technology (e.g., Chinese dependence on U.S. chips), and broader economic ties, suggests a potentially significant mitigating effect on open conflict, presenting a critical nuance to purely structuralist theories of power transition. The research further corroborates that the profound interdependence between the United States and China is a key factor in sustaining bilateral stability and mitigating the risks of conflict, a finding consistent with core liberal institutionalist theories. However, the research also indicates that while energy dependence functions as a powerful constraint during periods of stable competition, its leverage is conditional, that when core national security interests are directly threatened, such as Taiwan, South China Sea dispute for China, the calculus of foreign policy can undergo a profound re-evaluation.

It should be noticed that the relationship between two variables, strategic resources dependence and foreign policies formulation, are two-way, which might result in overestimation of energy reliance’s leverage in the research. It means the tougher foreign policy turns may also lead to Russia’s practice of energy leverage and decrease energy cooperation

level, so these two variables may enhance each other and strengthen the positive correlation. Therefore, energy reliance's influences may be overestimated in the research.

6. Conclusion

Pre-war analysis of Germany's energy reliance on Russia and its foreign policy, described as either "canny or weak and hesitant" [25], suggests the significant influence of energy cooperation on foreign policies formulation in the initial phase of the conflicts. The start of military action in the Ukraine Crisis, immediately resulted in the deterioration of the conditions and the emergence of other more important leverages. Although this constraining influence abates when core interests are directly threatened, a residual effect persists, continuing to shape policy choices, as the comparative case study demonstrates. However, the constraining influence of energy interdependence should not be overestimated. The conclusion also has potentials to be applied to other great power competitions, such as China and the US relation, with cautious.

In conclusion, this study transcends the specific case of Germany's energy divorce from Russia to offer a broader theoretical contribution to the analysis of interdependence in an era of renewed geopolitics. It demonstrates that the leverage derived from strategic resource dependence is not a static force but a dynamic one, whose potency is contingent on the phase of a political conflict.

For the wider world, it stands as a potent precedent that in the 21st century true resilience lies not in the depth of one's economic ties with any single power, but in the deliberate diversification of supply chains, the fostering of internal cohesion, and the strategic investment in technological and energy sovereignty. Thus, while interdependence can shape the opening moves of a geopolitical contest, it is ultimately resilience and strategic foresight that determine its endgame.

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