

Energy, Security and the Middle East

The Middle East is a region of great strategic significance for the United States as well as for the other major industrialized nations of the world. This is so in considerable measure as it contains the bulk of the world's proven reserves of oil. The aim of this conference is to ask if this significance must remain an unalterable fact of the strategic landscape for the foreseeable future – a period in which the Middle East's dominance of oil production is only expected to increase.

The impetus for this examination comes from two developments. First, the United States finds itself ever deeper engaged in the internal affairs of the region with mixed results at the moment of writing. This has led many to ask if the United States cannot simply disengage itself from this expanded commitment by reducing its need for oil. Second, oil prices are at near record highs and there is a persuasive school of thought which holds that this signals a permanent tightening of the world's oil supply – perhaps even a “Hubbert Peak” in the global production.

On the face of it the second development would appear to move the Middle East firmly back to center stage. Nevertheless, it also appears to open a window to an entirely new possibility – that of adopting an energy policy that can actually diversify energy sources and reduce the salience of the Middle East in the world's energy supply chain, without incurring a further substantial economic penalty.

These developments tie together since a permanent tightening of supply would indicate a permanently higher price for oil and thus a price floor that could make various alternatives competitive. At issue is whether it would be wise to adopt a national policy of actively encouraging such alternatives and what level of strategic “stand down” it would permit in the Middle East.

The questions involved are (at least):

- a) What the strategic interests of the United States in the Middle East and to what extent are they tied to oil supplies and energy security?
- b) What are the internal political, economic and security dynamics of the Middle East that will affect its role in global oil production over the next decade or two?
- c) What is energy security in an era of global markets?
- d) What domestic policies can enhance energy security? Do these carry efficiency costs?
- e) Given the more pessimistic outlook on global oil production that underlies current oil prices, can a policy framework sensibly promote the development of alternative energy sources and fuels?
- f) Aside from issues of national security and efficiency, how would such a new framework for energy production interact with concerns about climate change and the associated imperative for carbon mitigation?

- g) What level of strategic stand down would an energy policy permit in the most optimistic case and over what period of time? Would this result in greater strategic instability in the region?

Due to the inter-disciplinary nature of these questions, the conference will bring together experts from various disciplines. We plan to have experts on strategic and security issues, scientists specializing in energy issues, regional specialists on the Middle East and economists assemble in a group of about 25 people that can engage in a coherent dialog.