

The politics of energy security



Energy security concerns must be considered not only in terms of energy availability at an affordable price, but also from a political and social sciences perspective.

Energy security concerns have recently been thrown into stark relief for the Global North. Supply-chain issues and protectionist policies brought an energy crisis to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was exacerbated by the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Simultaneously, the transition away from global dependence on fossil fuels towards renewable energy as an energy security and environmental concern has not been a smooth one, presenting numerous challenges. The long-term impacts for households from these synchronous shocks remain unclear, while countries are reconsidering traditional energy partnerships, diversifying their energy portfolios and ramping up investments in renewable energy.

Energy security research has traditionally focused on the physical and economic feasibility of different energy types and mixes. This is largely reflected in the International Energy Agency's [definition](#) of energy security, which describes it as the "uninterrupted availability of energy sources at an affordable price". This definition highlights economic and supply challenges, yet it largely omits mention of the geopolitical conditions that influence energy security, or the wider societal consequences of associated decision-making.

Now, more than ever, perspectives from the wider social sciences – and particularly political science – are vital to understanding energy security concerns. Such views are necessary if we are to better understand and respond to rapidly evolving geopolitical challenges and the long-term impacts of the energy crisis at the community, national and international levels. To this end, this month, we present a

[Focus issue](#) that considers energy security from the perspectives of political science, international relations and policy, and brings together pieces that explore the complex political relationships that shape energy security, particularly in the Global North.

In terms of international relations, the energy transition and shift away from fossil fuels has direct implications for world order, which is a core focus in this discipline. As Karen Smith Stegen highlights in her [Perspective](#), although energy experts have often made assumptions about what a renewable-energy-reliant future may look like, it is worthwhile pausing to consider the basis of these outlooks and the underlying dynamics of changing energy relationships. Much of international-relations research is focused on cooperation and competition at the state level. The shift towards grid electrification and away from fossil fuel dependence means that traditional state partnerships, which for historic reasons have been largely influenced by energy needs, are changing rapidly. International relations may help to provide a more informed and nuanced view of cross-border electricity exchange and whether future grid–community cooperation is a realistic expectation.

It is equally important to not underestimate the role history has played in shaping energy politics, as national and regional histories inform decision-making and perceptions of risk. In their [Comment](#), Veronika Slakaityte, Izabela Surwillo and Trine Villumsen Berling reflect on historically diverging approaches to energy infrastructure across Europe and how – considering current and emerging threats – the region must cooperate to ensure future energy security. As Andrea Clabough highlights in her [World View](#), energy security is not created in a vacuum, and international cooperation on energy policy will be necessary at the transatlantic level if Europe and the United States are to weather the challenges of the transition.

Of course, in any discussion of energy security, it is important to acknowledge the

lived experiences of vulnerable communities. The shift away from fossil fuels necessitates a degree of societal restructuring. This is perhaps felt nowhere more directly than in communities historically reliant on the mining and extraction of fossil fuels. In her [Comment](#), Kamila Svobodova discusses livelihood security challenges facing these communities. Based on past transition experiences, she advocates for well-planned, locally led transitions grounded in collaboration between all relevant stakeholders.

Recent energy transition policies and the ongoing gas crisis in Europe have also had a direct impact on those already most susceptible to energy poverty in society. As our discussion in a [Q&A](#) with Zeljko Jovanovic from Open Society Foundations emphasizes, researchers and policymakers alike must not forget to address the unique needs of already-marginalized groups – such as the Roma community – when working to improve energy security during times of hardship and transition.

The pieces in this Focus issue draw from a range of perspectives on the complex and highly political challenges in energy security today. They span concerns facing marginalized and local communities to those of regional and international partners. Of course, energy security is a global issue and encompasses a wide range of subtopics beyond the scope of this Focus. Research on this topic needs to also account for perspectives from the Global South and challenges facing those in other parts of the world. However, our hope is that in highlighting social and political viewpoints, these pieces demonstrate the important value these disciplines bring alongside the contributions from economic and physical schools. As such, we hope to foster collaboration across the disciplines to better respond to the complex energy security challenges we face today and tomorrow.

Published online: 20 October 2023