

**MIDDLE EAST CROSSING THE RUBICON INTO EUROPE'S ENERGY POLICY.
SECURITY AND SUPPLY IMPLICATIONS OF
THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE**

Abstract:	<i>2021 and 2022 were not easy years for Europe considering the recovery plans designed to ease the Covid 19 pandemic effects on the economy and the “enemy at the gates” momentum translated into the illegal war started by Russia in Ukraine. 24th of February 2022, will be for the European energy sector what 9/11 was for world security. Without thinking that with the passing of the 2022-2023 winter, the energy supply problems have evaporated, how we will tackle this issue in 2023 is critical for the European continent, as it will unveil how ready we are to find alternatives to the Russian supply and combine energetic autonomy with price affordability while not forgetting about the climate goals. How viable is the collaboration with the Middle East and how quickly will they be able to supply at least part of the European gas needs?</i>
Keywords:	Energy; energy security; Europe; gas; Middle East, Repower EU; climate change
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Europe, the birthplace of the modern global international society, enjoyed until March 2022 a stable peace. Even though in 2014 Europe saw its dependency on Russian Gas in the aftermath of the Crimean annexation as a critical vulnerability, have done little to prevent this dependency to rise even more. In 2015, at the European level, the idea of a resilient "Energy Union" was put forward, which in the first phase would solve some of the problems related to the diversification of supply (energy sources, suppliers, and routes), especially laying the foundations for building alternative ways to bring gas from sources other than Russia⁴¹. This push forward was meant to consolidate the first steps that were taken since 2003, starting with the “European Security Strategy” (ESS), the Convention on the Future of Europe, the 2004 Inter-Governmental Conference (IGC), and most importantly the 2004 and 2007 enlargements that paved the way for a different kind of energy strategy. But, in 2021, Russia accounted for 40% of European natural gas consumption⁴², or 155 bcm² with a European Union also dependent on Russian oil, but less conspicuous compared to gas, given the alternative sources and a relatively developed oil market.

This research demands constant analytical attention to world events and brings up the question of whether the Middle East countries will benefit from this international context and succeed in having a

⁴¹ European Commission, *Energy Union Package. A Framework Strategy for a Resilient Energy Union with a Forward-Looking Climate Change Policy*, Brussels, February 25, 2015, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6594-2015-INIT/en/pdf>, (30.03.2022)

⁴² Irina Patrahau, Michel Rademaker, Lucia van Geuns, Sarah Ojukwu, Philip Geurts, *European tank storage in global value chains. Outlook to 2030*, in “The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies”, April 2022, p. 6

foothold in the European energy strategy in the next decade, or will remain committed to their Asian long-term contracts, ignoring the newly risen European opportunity? To tackle this very contemporary and highly politicized subject, we first need to provide some background information regarding the Middle East's political and energy strategy and analyze different specialty reports on the state of current exports toward Asian countries.

Starting in June 2017, the “Ramadan Blockade”⁴³ took the international community by surprise, the blockade of Qatar is considered one of the most significant geopolitical events in the Gulf region, since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and carried weightily consequences in Western interests in the MENA region⁴⁴. In many ways, the blockade of Qatar failed. Firstly, it failed to generate regime change in Doha, and secondly, it failed to win anything other than some initial regional, but no international support. In this sense, only the governments of Chad, the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Jordan, the Maldives, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal have cut or downgraded ties with Doha, but not only that no other states followed them, but most of these countries restored relations with Qatar in the months that followed, with the example of Jordan who signed an impressive economic investment deal, in June 2018, paving the way for the blockade to rapidly fell away⁴⁵. The official reconciliation came only in January 2021, when the GCC members (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) signed the “Al-Ula Declaration”⁴⁶, showing for the first time in the last 5 years the willingness to start a new chapter in their relationship.

From an international point of view, Qatar was never truly isolated. This shows that imposing sanctions nowadays is difficult in a world where every state has its economic interests and pursues its agenda. The same was the case for Russia, in the early stages of economic sanctions after the Crimean annexation⁴⁷. In the days following the Qatar blockade, the Turkish parliament met with Qatari officials to ratify two accords covering joint military cooperation, even though Turkey had already had a military base in Qatar since 2014, this ratification sent a visible message of solidarity. Also, in the first months after the blockade, Washington DC Hosted the first US-Qatar Counterterrorism Dialogue, Qatar being the first GCC country to sign a memorandum of understanding with the USA on the topic⁴⁸.

Qatar managed to protect itself from major geopolitical shocks mainly by expanding its Petroleum liquefaction and regasification capacity and pursuing an energetic expansionist foreign policy. Some of the logistical advancements included significant improvements to warehousing and storage capacity, part of their energetic resilience plans dating from 1989 to 1991 and signing contracts for deep-water port and energy-industrial hubs at Ras Laffan primarily building LNG infrastructure⁴⁹. This was possible with the support of an entire portfolio of international oil company partners that understood that oil and gas resources underpin the economies and political structures of the Middle East. The region hosts almost half of the world's proven oil reserves and more than a third of its gas reserves⁵⁰ and it's the world's largest net crude exporter⁵¹. According to the Annual Statistical Bulletin 2019 published by the Oil Exporting Countries, cited on the organization's website, the Middle East held 64.5% of OPEC's total

⁴³ On 5 June 2017, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt announced that they have cut diplomatic ties with Qatar, closing borders, closing their airspace for Qatar airplanes, and its ships were unable to dock in any of the above-mentioned ports.

⁴⁴ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, Hurst & Company Publishers, London, 2020, p. 5

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 7

⁴⁶ Al-Ula Declaration. Al-Ula, 5 January 2021, Registration with the Secretariat of the United Nations: Bahrain, 1 July 2021 under no. 56786, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/No%20Volume/56786/Part/I-56786-08000002805b2870.pdf>, (03.02.2023)

⁴⁷ *EU restrictive measures against Russia over Ukraine (since 2014)*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/>, (10.04.2022)

⁴⁸ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Op. cit.*, p. 8

⁴⁹ David Roberts, *Understanding Qatar's Foreign Policy Objectives*, in “Doha Office of the Royal United Services Institute for Security and Defence”, Qatar, Mediterranean Politics, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2012, pp. 235-237

⁵⁰ Ahmed Mehdi, *The Middle East and the Geopolitics of the Energy Transition: Myths and Realities*, in “Oxford Institute for Energy Studies”, 2021, p. 2

⁵¹ Yannias A. Stivachtis, *Conflict and Diplomacy in the Middle East. External Actors and Regional Rivalries*, E-International Relations Publishing, Bristol, England, 2018, p. 9

reserves at the end of 2018⁵². The Energy sector plays consequently, a vital role in determining both the domestic stability and the international reach of a state. Everything is connected to the Middle East, and whatever happens in a country will influence the surrounding region. The Eastern Mediterranean has a huge energy potential, and when it comes to its gas reserves, this region will be a pivotal factor for the future of European energy security. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 shows how quickly a situation can change the outlook for European energy policy⁵³. Several agreements between the Arab countries can secure a part of the energy needed in Europe to reduce the dependency on Russian gas. One key partnership started in 2019 between Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and the UAE, under the name of “The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum” (EMGF)⁵⁴. Also, another project was signed in January 2020, between Israel, Cyprus, and Greece, to develop an eastern Mediterranean (EastMed)⁵⁵ underwater natural gas pipeline, that would enable the transport of gas from the Mediterranean Sea toward Europe.

Both projects not only could secure a new Middle Eastern footprint on the European gas market, but their geopolitical ramifications will impact the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline and will pester Erdogan’s ambitions to control the Eastern Mediterranean gas routes. When we are talking about the Middle East foreign policy, two aspects weigh more than others in shaping the region’s international behavior: the importance of the leader and the victory of pragmatism over traditionalism. We cannot ignore the fact that oil and gas resources had an impact on the political and psychological architecture of the region, and when we are analyzing the new Middle Eastern pragmatism, we should always do it about the “rentier state paradigm”⁵⁶. This paradigm is a common tool in the interpretation of the political dynamics of Middle Eastern countries and it refers to the fact that the state is independent of the society and instead of imposing taxes, rather directly supports a large part of the society by spending domestically whatever it’s receiving from the oil rent⁵⁷. Even though a rentier state does not seek legitimacy through democratic representation, the nature of the relationship between the power holders and the citizens is substantially different. The representation is made through traditional consultative mechanisms, like the open majlis (councils). At the same time, not all Middle Eastern states are rentier states. The Gulf monarchies managed to advance compared to the rentier republics (Iraq, Libya, Yemen) because they realized they need to integrate and involve all components of the society in a sort of political participation. By creating formal and informal instruments for representation, they managed to create a feeling of inclusion even for the expatriate communities, which are seen as an integrated part of society. If the first years of an identifiable Middle East system (after 1945) were marked by competition and warfare, the present geopolitical fabric of the region looks characterized by the idea of moderation and coexistence⁵⁸.

In the last decade, there have been two major shifts in the Middle East geopolitical construct that has challenged in my opinion Iran’s and Turkey’s hegemonic ambitions and has shown an increase in the collaboration with other strategic partners that a while ago seemed impossible. The first development is the coagulation of an informal coalition between Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE also called “The Alliance of Moderation”⁵⁹. The 2nd major development is the Abraham Accords, a historic shift in the geopolitical climate of the region, translated in a set of peace treaties signed in 2020 between the United Arab Emirates and Israel, followed by normalization of the relation between Israel and Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. Translated in a map of realpolitik, the power chart for the Middle East will look like this:

⁵² Ecaterina Mațoi, *Exchanges in MENA Region at the beginning of the 21st Century*, Editura Universității Naționale de Apărare “Carol I”, Bucharest, 2020, p. 32

⁵³ Irina Patrahau, Michel Rademaker, Lucia van Geuns, Sarah Ojukwu, Philip Geurts, *Op. cit.*, p. 8

⁵⁴ Avi Melamed, Maia Hoffman, *Inside the Middle East. Entering a new Era*, Skyhorse Publishing, 2022, p. 345

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 132

⁵⁶ Giacomo Luciani, *Oil and Political Economy in the International Relations of the Middle East*, in Louise Fawcett “International Relations of the Middle East”, Oxford University Press, Fifth Edition, 2019, p. 119

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 121

⁵⁸ Tareq Y. Ismael, *International Relations of the Contemporary Middle East*, Syracuse University Press, 1986, p. 30

⁵⁹ Avi Melamed, Maia Hoffman, *Op. cit.*, p. 338

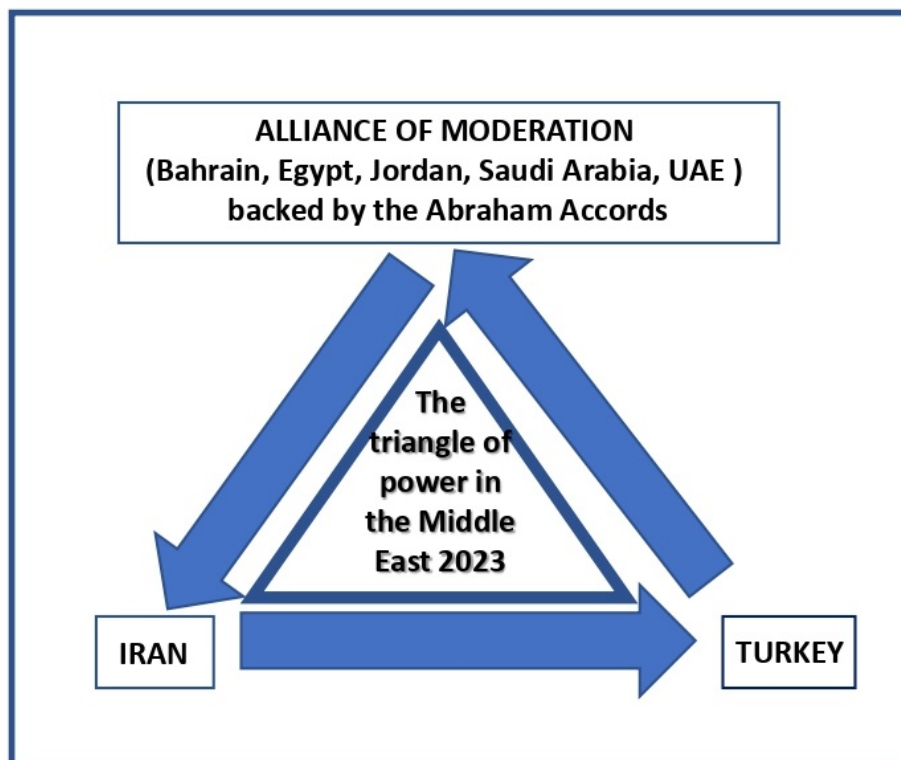


Fig. 1 The Triangle of Power in the Middle East in 2023⁶⁰

One of the most strategic priorities for the Alliance of Moderation right now is to secure its shipping lanes by securing the Gulf of Aden – the Bab al Mandab area.

The world's most important maritime routes are at stake, and not only the Alliance of Moderation fights for securing them but also Iran and Turkey, because whoever controls the Gulf of Aden, also controls the gate that connects the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea and of course the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea. And because this corridor is the fastest route between the East and the West, it is a global issue, not a regional one. The International Community should secure maritime freedom and stabilize the area next to Yemen because it is a vital issue for European energy security but also because the world's trade flow cannot depend on regional interventions.

⁶⁰ Author's own research



Fig. 2 The Triangle of Power in the Middle East in 2023⁶¹

During the research, two important events are taking place simultaneously. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi began his three-day visit to China, while Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation, met US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Washington. China is gaining more and more leverage in the sensitive ecosystem of power in the Middle East. The Iranian visit doesn't come necessarily as a surprise, and it's not the first attempt in recent years to challenge the USA's position in the region⁶².

The 25 years agreement signed in March 2021 between Iran and China is the best proof that China's involvement in the Middle East is growing. This agreement will develop numerous areas of collaboration between the 2 countries, from trade and military to infrastructure and energy, and even though China has followed over the years a politic of "non-involvement" in foreign policy, it will be interesting to observe from now on if it shifts from a geoeconomic to a geostrategic setting. In 2013, China launched the One Belt and One Road Initiative (OBOR, then renamed Belt and Road Initiative – BRI) which was seen by many of the Western powers as an ideal "ticket – entry" of China into the Middle East. In contrast to China, the USA launched the Asia-Pacific Rebalancing strategy after the Iraq war, shifting its strategic focus from the Middle East⁶³ to the Asia-Pacific, and from counterterrorism to responding to the challenge of major powers. This shift of interest, corroborated by the fact that the West failed to stabilize most of the "Arab Spring" countries, including Iraq and Afghanistan, left enough negotiation space for China which saw this as an opportunity to spread its influence in the Middle East, and to grow roots where elsewhere it used to be only partially involved. It is also true that the US-GCC security umbrella remains crucial for the Gulf monarchies, where countries like Saudi Arabia and the

⁶¹ The Economist, *Oil on troubled waters*, May 9th, 2015, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/05/09/oil-on-troubled-waters>, (1.02.2022)

⁶² Marc Lynch, Jullian Schwedler, Sean Yom, *The Political Science of the Middle East. Theory and research since the Arab Uprisings*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2022, pp. 223-225

⁶³ The Trump administration has removed Patriot missiles from KSA, and the Biden administration decided to evacuate from Afghanistan, marking the end of 20 years of war.

UAE are looking to diversify their military cooperation and set the base for military industries. However, in the long run, if the Iranian threat will not be tackled by the USA, the Arab states can look towards some Asian powers such as China to establish politico-security arrangements that might guarantee the same stability that it's been achieved through long-term commercial contracts. Even though from a security point of view China appears reluctant to adopt a geopolitical posture mainly because it knows it doesn't have the military or logistical capabilities, through its bilateral meetings with Iran, China is ambitiously parading that it doesn't lack the will to challenge the West and enter into trade and infrastructure development partnerships with state entities that pose a threat to the security and stability of the Middle Eastern region.

As the UN restrictions on supplies of major arms to and all arms from Iran expired in October 2020⁶⁴, this opened a new opportunity for arms sales and military cooperation with China. This shows clearly that Sino-Iranian relations will extend beyond oil. When it comes to the security architecture in the Middle East, many scholars⁶⁵ are considering that China will not challenge the web created by the American security strategy, but it remains my opinion that a dragon awakened from its sleep will never be satisfied with pebbles. This takes us to the conclusion that a void of power will always be filled by others, and by doing so, the EU should keep a critical eye when it comes to monitoring China's growing influence in the Middle East. China has become one of the most important trading partners and direct investors in the Middle East, and together with India, Japan, and South Korea, forms part of a group of countries that imports around 30% of its crude oil and more than 40% of its natural gas from MENA countries⁶⁶.

According to the "Global Voice of Gas,"⁶⁷ China is importing more LNG from the Middle East compared to 2021. In numbers this can be translated to a 75% increase in Qatari shipments in 2022, accounting for 15.7 MT, and continuing its strategy for securing long-term energy contracts. In December 2022, China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) signed a 27-year contract to buy LNG from Qatar Energy's North Field expansion project. Oman LNG has also signed a four-year contract with China's Unipeac to deliver 1 million tons per annum of LNG from 2025⁶⁸. With this pair of aces in its hand, China is not taking chances when it comes to securing its reserves of energy that can keep pace with its industrial development, even if this means neglecting, once again, the 2060 target for carbon neutrality, an assumed responsibility that came with the signing of the Paris Agreement.

Driven by the Russia-Ukraine war that started a year ago coupled with the European winter season that just passed, the global gas demand rose by about 4.3%⁶⁹. China managed to shield itself from high gas prices because it preferred long-term oil-indexed contracts over spot cargoes. To reduce exposure to the gas market-price volatility, Europe is starting to also consider long-term LNG contracts. With lower volumes flowing from Russia, Europe's reliance on cargoes from the US, Africa, and the Middle East increased. Over time, oil prices experienced 3 long cycles until the Russian invasion of Ukraine: the 1st high-price period from 1973 to 1985 (the OPEC embargo, with a 300% increase in the price), a lower-price phase between 1985 and 2003 (with a short price-rise in 1990 due to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait from \$34 to about \$77 per barrel, going swiftly down to 37\$ per barrel in 1991) and a 3rd high-price phase between 2004 to 2014 (mostly because of the growing demand from China, India, Brazil, and other emerging economies that set in motion an upward price trend)⁷⁰. In February 2022, the already oil-high prices skyrocketed to over \$110 per barrel.

⁶⁴ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute UNSCR 1737, *UN arms embargo on Iran*, https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un_arms_embargoes/iran, (13.03.2023)

⁶⁵ Camille Lons, Jonathan Fulton, Degang Sun, Naser Al-Tamimi, *China's Great Game in the Middle East*, in "European Council on Foreign Relations", 2019, p.10

⁶⁶ Valeria Talbot, Ugo Tramballi, *Looking West. The Rise of Asia in the Middle East*, Institute for International Political Studies, Italy, 2020, pp. 8-9

⁶⁷ *Global Voice of Gas Report*, in "The International Gas Union", Issue 1, March 2023, <https://www.igu.org/news/global-voice-of-gas-1-vol-3/>, (21.03.2023)

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p.12

⁶⁹ *Global Gas Report 2022*, SNAM, in "International Gas Union", Rystad Energy, 28th IGU World Gas Conference, <https://www.igu.org/resources/global-gas-report-2022/>, (05.2022), p. 13

⁷⁰ Giacomo Luciani, *Op. cit.*, p. 108

On the spur of the moment, in March 2022 after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Europe had to quickly get a better grip on the situation and understand where its current and possible future strategic dependencies lie. This led to the reactivation of old relationships and a shift of perspective. It was expected that the energy sector would significantly change, targeting new supply chains, new investments in gas infrastructure, and tank storage.⁷¹ The same month, the International Energy Agency (IEA) provided a 10-Point Plan to the European Union to reduce reliance on Russian supplies by over a third while supporting the European Green Deal. The measures proposed are⁷²:

- no new gas supply contracts with Russia;
- replacing Russian supplies with gas from alternative sources;
- introducing minimum gas storage obligations to enhance market resilience;
- accelerating the deployment of new wind and solar projects;
- maximizing generation from existing dispatchable low-emissions sources: bioenergy and nuclear;
- enacting short-term measures to shelter vulnerable electricity consumers from high prices;
- speed up the replacement of gas boilers with heat pumps;
- accelerating energy efficiency improvements in buildings and industry;
- encourage a temporary thermostat adjustment by consumers;
- step up efforts to diversify and decarbonize sources of power system flexibility;

Not long after the IEA Report was issued, Germany's economy minister, Robert Habeck, announced that Germany has agreed to a contract with Qatar for the supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG), underlining that Qatar could help meet REPowerEU's long-term objectives⁷³.

The geopolitical instability driven in large part by both the post-pandemic global demand resurgence and the Ukraine conflict is reflected in the global oil markets, not only pushing the prices higher than they would otherwise be but also baiting sparks for international competition for LNG supplies. Even though China wants to avoid bidding wars with European customers at the same time making sure it can fulfill its domestic demand, the high oil and gas prices are nevertheless a corrosive factor for international relations, especially because not all European countries are ready to sign long-term agreements with Middle Eastern countries like China did.

China is a latecomer to the Middle East from all points of view: politically, economically, and diplomatically. It all started in 2000 when China passed from being *self-sufficient*⁷⁴ in terms of energy supplies to import-oriented. Then, consequently, it needed to establish tighter diplomatic relations with all major countries in the Middle East that could provide the resources it needed.⁷⁵ The UAE's stable political and social environment, its booming economy, and its role as a transportation & trade hub have made it a top policy priority for Beijing. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has become the main link between China and the Middle East in recent years. After more than three decades of development, China's economic relations with Middle Eastern countries have developed into a structure with "one body and two wings" with energy cooperation as the main body, and infrastructure construction and trade as the two wings. In 2014 China's total energy demand was about 308 million tons of oil, of which 52.1% came from the Middle East⁷⁶.

As part of its long-term strategy, China is looking for partnerships in all sectors of the industry in the Middle East, such as Smart Dubai 2021, Saudi Vision 2030, UAE Vision 2030, and Morocco 2030, hoping to achieve win-win cooperation between both sides; (some examples of major investments in the

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 17, "Terminals under EXPANSION: Europe 18%, North America 18%, South America 1%, Middle East 3%, Africa 3%, Asia 47%, compared to terminals under construction: Middle East 54%, Europe 12%, Asia 17%, Africa 6%, North America 7%".

⁷² *A 10-Point Plan to Reduce the European Union's Reliance on Russian Natural Gas*, in "International Energy Agency", 3 March 2022, <https://www.iea.org/reports/a-10-point-plan-to-reduce-the-european-unions-reliance-on-russian-natural-gas>, (10.03.2022)

⁷³ *Germany agrees on a gas deal with Qatar to help end dependency on Russia*, in "The Guardian", March 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/20/germany-gas-deal-qatar-end-energy-dependency-on-russia#:~:text=The%20EU%20itself%20has%20said,fossil%20fuels%20well%20before%202030>, (10.03.2022)

⁷⁴ Valeria Talbot, Ugo Tramballi, *Op.cit.*, p 21

⁷⁵ China Established diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia in the late 1990s.

⁷⁶ Valeria Talbot, Ugo Tramballi, *Op.cit.* p 17

UAE: Viceroy Dubai Palm Jumeirah – 1 bil \$, Shamkha South Infrastructure LOT 3 – 452 mil \$ City of Light Reem Island – 436 mil \$, Khalifa Port 2nd Container Terminal (value unknown)⁷⁷.

MENA region embodies all three major sensitivities of the European Union: energy-security-migration, nevertheless maintaining its geostrategic importance for the EU and its member states. Middle Eastern energy supplies are considered a political commodity⁷⁸. All EU member states agree that continued availability of oil and gas from alternative sources and minimized Russian import dependence is a top priority, but when it comes to the implementation of such diversification strategies, EU countries seem more eager to go for it individually rather than as a single bloc. With China putting a quasi-monopole on Middle Eastern resources and considering the major lobby and financial implications of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, the EU confronts itself with a whole new reality. In this new reality, it must adapt and react much faster, reminding itself to be a Union and behave as one to transform this new reality into an opportunity.

Although climate action and a low-carbon future remain Europe's main priority, the war in Ukraine made the security and the supply strategy take a stance over climate goals in the next period. While there is undoubtedly significant pressure within the European community to decarbonize and measures are increasingly taken in that direction, gas demand is expected to decrease by only slightly in 2030. Now, only Bahrain and Qatar can distribute oil and gas to Europe, but in much smaller quantities than those exported to Asia. Looking into ways to replace Russian imports of LNG and oil will be without any doubt a difficult, technologically complex, and expensive process, but utterly necessary. The current situation must serve as an "étude de cas" for future strategies, and the European community needs to think more pragmatically when it comes to the energetic predictability of the next decades. Without a doubt, Middle Eastern suppliers will play a major role in shaping Europe's future energy policy, mostly due to their plans to diversify their downstream strategies. MENA region is now the "Queen" of the energetic chessboard, with huge petroleum reserves, low costs of exploitation, and significant investments in infrastructure. Among its states, Qatar is exporting around 77.1 million tons of LNG/annum, making it the world's 2nd largest LNG exporter after Australia⁷⁹.

Conclusions

From a geopolitical point of view, the Middle East should seize this opportunity to settle previous differences, understanding that in this new reality, only together they can maximize their chances to enter the European market in full force and erase from the collective memory the "Suez Crisis" of 1956, which coincided with a break in Europe's dependence on Middle Eastern resources (two-thirds of the oil used by Europe was coming from the Middle East at the time). With the election of Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan as UAE president, it will be interesting to observe if the UAE's foreign policy will incline towards the consolidation of the "Alliance of Moderation", that is giving the UAE a leadership position in the Middle Eastern security architecture. It is already clear that one thing changed fundamentally. For the first time, through the Alliance of Moderation and the Abraham Accords, the GCC countries started to conduct a part of their foreign policies as a single bloc, which will help them to benefit collectively from their vital importance as global energy suppliers. These agreements make them less vulnerable to external powers' interference, and if implemented well, they will become trustworthy trade partners, negotiating major commercial and energy deals with the EU. If they will negotiate as a welded political and economic bloc, maybe the Arab Gulf states will increase their energy exports to the EU, as for the moment, it sells more energy products to Asian countries than to the European Union and North America combined⁸⁰. The EU has a privileged position, as it ranks among the top investors in the MENA region, for FDI⁸¹. In

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 20

⁷⁸ Vincent Durac, Francesco Cavatorta, *Politics and Governance in the Middle East*, 2nd Edition, Bloomsbury Academic, United Kingdom, 2023, pp.112-115

⁷⁹ *World LNG Report 2021*, in "International Gas Union", June 3, 2021, <https://www.igu.org/resources/world-lng-report-2021/>, (10.03.2022)

⁸⁰ Valeria Talbot, Ugo Tramballi, *Op.cit.*, p.101

⁸¹ FDI – Middle East and North Africa Investment Policy Perspectives, *OECD Report*, 2021, <https://www.oecdilibrary.org/docserver/6d84ee94en.pdf?expires=1681826059&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=70B0F23322E750580CD5BE4BA609E64B2>, (10.02.2023)

Western Europe, the race to install new regasification capacities is ongoing with Germany already having two new floating terminals operational in Wilhelmshaven and Lubmin⁸², and more terminals are anticipated to start up in France, Estonia, Greece, Italy, and Turkey. Reducing reliance on Russian gas will not be simple for the EU, requiring first a “leap of faith” in strengthening international collaborations with other international LNG exporters, but most of all depending upon its capacity to sustain a concrete energetic policy. These new projects will allow European countries to import as much LNG as is available, but it is important for European supply security not to depend only on these resources, as any major incident in the LNG supply chain worldwide could jeopardize its stability once again. From alternative pipelines to strong international dialogue on energy markets and security, both Europe and the Middle East find themselves at an important crossroads in their cooperation⁸³.

The success of this cooperation will be critical, with the potential to influence not only the international market but the lives of millions of consumers, who are already concerned about rising prices and the energy market volatility. The COP28 Climate Conference that will take place in November in the United Arab Emirates might show why 2023 was still a year where the world dealt with unstable oil and gas markets, with a lethargic green transition and a hypothetical common carbon tax that might become a clearer strategy only after this immediate energy crisis is over. At the same time, Middle Eastern exporter countries should reconsider 2 major conditions for their future contracts with European countries: one of them is the minimum duration of the contracts. European countries will never agree to the same long-term contracts as China for example, mostly because they are under the commitment of the 2030 Climate Target Plan, where the EU's ambition settle to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to at least 55% below 1990 levels by 2030. At the same time, Europe is strongly working towards developing its potential for biomethane and renewable H2. The second condition that should be changed in the Middle Eastern supply contracts is the possibility for the importing country to sell part of those resources to other countries.

If the European apport to conflict resolution and political reforms in the Middle East was stuck mostly because of the accumulation of complex bureaucratic structures managing the EU-MENA relations, the energy supply crisis that hit Europe a year ago just bound Europe to the Middle Eastern exporting countries, becoming more complex and inextricable than it was before. It will be interesting to develop in future research how the commercial agreements for gas supply might detangle the political agenda between the Middle Eastern countries and the EU, paving the way for closer collaboration.

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