

## **Energy security as the next national security priority**

Until the September 2001 attacks, Australia's national security strategy was becoming more multi-dimensional. With the end of the Cold War, the dominance of military defense as the key concern of national security was waning. Instead Australia's strategy was becoming more expansive and starting to include other security challenges such as transnational crime, fisheries protection, environmental degradation and energy security.

However after the terrorist attacks, the nation's national security strategy was pared back and focused almost exclusively on countering terrorism. All other issues were shunted off to individual agencies for them to advance in their own way or simply shelved.

The problem with this has been that the other security issues have not gone away. If anything, they have become more pressing.

While Australia's security attention narrowed, most other countries' definition of what constitutes national security broadened. This is no better illustrated than in China. China has recognised that its national security interests lie in securing its economic growth to maintaining internal stability, and delivering diplomatic and military power.

Even the US has started to re-broaden its national security agenda. Earlier this year, the US released its National Security Strategy which identifies a range of security threats beside terrorism including environment catastrophes, HIV/AIDS and influenza pandemics. The threats to energy security attracted considerable attention.

The focus on energy security is not unique to the US. Most nations are dependent on foreign supplies of liquid fuel and any loss in supply or significant disruptions will have an immediate and economically catastrophic impact.

Many of Australia's regional neighbours are more exposed than Australia to foreign energy supplies. These nations have seen this vulnerability as a strategic threat rather than an economic threat. The difference in perspective is significant as this drives the response. If unreliable energy supplies are seen as an economic issue, then the traditional response is to improve the functioning of the market. This means encouraging a freer market, funding alternative energy research and removing energy subsidies so that supply and demand reflects energy's true price.

On the other hand, if energy provision is seen as a national security issue, then the entire weight of a country's diplomatic, trade and even military effort is bought to bear to ensure its supply is guaranteed. The goal is preferential access and locked in supply. Ways to do this may include supporting dubious regimes in oil rich countries, stalling energy trade reforms, supporting oil suppliers' international political agendas, signing multi-decade supply contracts, and buying up foreign oil fields.

These non-market responses have earned a rebuke from the US. In the US National Security Strategy, it specifically criticised China for seeking to lock up energy supplies around the world and intervene in energy markets rather than leaving supply to market forces.

Given the international moves around energy supplies, it is surprising that Australia has largely ignored energy security.

Both the Government and the Opposition need to place energy security on the national security agenda. The need to do increases monthly as the geo-political environment gets reshaped as countries pursue resource-based foreign policy.

They have an opportunity to do so in two weeks time when Government and Opposition Ministers are addressing Australia's first Energy Security Symposium. The conference will provide a long overdue spotlight at the consequences for Australia's strategic interest of the world's pursuit of reliable energy supplies and what it means for Australia's strategic interest.

What both parties should do is to discard the ideological belief that reliable energy supply can be delivered by more efficient market forces. Many countries around the world are intervening in energy supply because they know that this is one key to their national security.

*Athol Yates, Director, Homeland Security Research Centre and session chair at the Energy Security Symposium on 11 October, Canberra. [www.homelandsecurity.org.au/energy](http://www.homelandsecurity.org.au/energy)*

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