As Ukraine Tensions Soar, America's Greatest Weapon Remains Trapped Underground

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DANIEL B. MARKIND

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Daniel B. Markind is a Forbes.com energy column contributor. The views expressed in this article are not to be associated with the views of Flaster Greenberg PC.

Last week, President Joe Biden warned Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky that a Russian invasion of Ukraine might be imminent. While Zelensky does not seem to share that assessment, full scale war in Eastern Europe seems closer now than at any time since the breakup of Yugoslavia and, before that, World War 2.

Since taking office, President Biden has made a point of moving in concert with America's NATO allies in carrying out foreign policy. For the Ukraine situation, that includes potentially sending troops to NATO countries that border Ukraine, such as Poland and Lithuania. One key NATO ally, however, has been an outlier when it comes to the sending of troops and the imposing of sanctions. Germany, thoroughly dependent on Russian oil and natural gas, has refused to confirm that it will support sanctions against Russia or its strongman, Vladimir Putin. Instead, Germany has insisted that NATO act with "prudence" in dealing with Russia.

Germany, of course, has been desperately trying to complete the Nord Stream 2 pipeline directly from Russia to Germany through the Baltic Sea. Combined with the refusal of the United States to build out its natural gas pipeline infrastructure, the completion and opening of Nord Stream 2 would complete the virtual "surrender" of both Germany and the United States to Russia regarding energy security and dependence in Europe.

To handle the threatened Russian energy cutoff, the United States has been searching frantically for alternative sources of energy. Aside from all of this being eminently foreseeable, the current situation amplifies how foolish American energy policy has been. Now, partly thanks to perceived American weakness and needing to preserve Europe's future politically and economically, we are faced with potentially placing more American men and women in harm's way thousands of miles from home – only this time with a better armed and eminently more powerful enemy, Russia, than we ever faced in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, America's most effective weapon that could be a huge deterrent to Putin, the Marcellus Shale natural gas that could be exported to Europe in immense quantities, remains trapped in the ground and unable to get from the point of production to ports from which it could be shipped as liquified natural gas, a victim of environmental extremism that has never made much sense in the greater context.

The current European threat means the danger of environmental extremism no longer is an abstraction. A Putin who knew that the United States could easily supply Europe's natural gas needs, and potentially even take away for good Russia's energy market there, would be a much weaker Putin. This has been obvious for years. It also would have been a blessing for the environment, as the gas supplying Europe would have been drilled in the Marcellus under strict American environmental regulations, instead of being drilled in the Arctic following almost no Russian environmental safeguards.

Still, we have said no. We have not built the pipelines that would have brought the Marcellus Shale gas to market, or the export terminals that would have secured the energy supply to New York City and much of the rest of the northeast in the United States. Instead, we have made ourselves vulnerable, both in terms of our world posture and influence as well as meeting our domestic energy needs, only increasing what must be an immense impression of weakness to the Kremlin.

Instead of begging nations like Qatar to provide natural gas to Europe should Russian supplies be suspended, any thinking person would realize that it would be far better to have the necessary resources available at our disposal to do it ourselves. And, in fact, with the immense Marcellus Shale reserves, we have exactly that. But, again, there is the rub, because we have not been prescient enough to realize the strength of our own position and, instead, have acted decidedly against our own interests. To realize this, we as Americans have to think – not just react, or look at the matter myopically.

Hydraulic fracturing is an industrial process. All such processes have potential environmental downsides. But, then, so do processes such as the installation, storage and transmission of energy from hydropower, as well as wind and solar. No form of energy production is completely problem free. All have certain pluses and minuses, certain trade-offs. But that does not mean that, in the big picture, putting all of our eggs in one energy basket, so to speak, would ever be a good idea.

By refusing to think expansively and instead falling back on simplistic slogans and myopic energy policy, despite all good intentions, we now see a Europe more vulnerable to Russian adventurism than at any time since the fall of the Soviet Union. We are sending American troops farther into Eastern Europe than ever before. A 1,200 kilometer pipeline may open soon in the Baltic Sea to transport Russian gas from the arctic to Germany. The money that would have developed and met the energy needs of the economies of northeastern Pennsylvania and the southern tier of New York State instead will go, instead, toward the Russian military buildup.

If you fail to understand the logic of this, you may be guilty of doing the one thing that seems to be all too prevalent in the energy debate of the 2020's. You will be guilty of reflexively thinking but not committing real thought.

ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

Daniel Markind