Geopolitical contention and institutional inadequacy in the global energy game

If one wants to understand the current condition of energy policies in the world, there used to be only two options. First, the sea of literature on energy policies in individual nations provides abundant information about how each country or regional political entity deals with energy use. Second, several organizations, such as the International Energy Agency (IEA), regularly publish overview studies of global trends in energy consumption and regulation. These two types of sources offer valuable insights with regard to both national and global trends; but what is lacking is an understanding of how political entities interact with each other in the geopolitical sense when it comes to energy policies.

WITh THE Publication of The Globalization of Energy, a third option now becomes available that allows for an appreciation of international geopolitical realities that always shadow the making of energy policies. In introducing the international relational perspective to the study of energy policies, it is easy to overemphasize conflicts of interests or international cooperation as an obvious binary. The authors in this collection transcend this binary, discussing the complexity and specificity in the historical relations between China and the European Union, and how changing geopolitical relations shape energy policies. The chapters not only attend to the domestic and international conditions in China and the European Union, but also discuss other important players in the game, such as the United States, India, Iran, and Russia. The volume takes full advantage of an edited book, bringing together research from different perspectives. Some chapters discuss the issues from the vantage point of energy suppliers, i.e., that of Russia and Iran. Some stand in the shoes of energy demanders. Other chapters examine the dynamics between different demanders. The accounts encompass a broad range of perspectives, but also stay focused on its central theme of Sino-EU energy relations, thereby gaining both breadth and depth.

The first part of the book offers a well-rounded overview of the geopolitical reality of the relation between China and the EU, and how energy issues play an increasingly important role in the relation. A key contribution of the chapters in this part is the identification of the potential for cooperation between China and the EU. The cooperation should not only be premised on the shared demand for oil and gas, but be rooted in a common domestic institutional arrangement that China and the EU share. Specifically, in both political entities, a centralized governing body is responsible for setting up goals of energy savings, and each local governing body devises their own strategies of achieving the goals.

In the European Union, the EU Commission sets legally binding targets. The targets include greenhouse gas emission reduction goals, energy efficiency goals, energy source diversification goals, among others. However, the Commission does not detail the specific action plans through which the goals should be achieved. Member states have the leeway to determine strategies that would work best in the national context. A similar institutional arrangement is in place in China where the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) is responsible for goal-setting in the form of Five-Year Plans. Provincial level governments in China are required to meet the goals as mandated by the NDRC, by way of locally defined strategies. Similar domestic governing structures in China and the European Union reflect similar problems faced by the two political entities. Both are troubled by rising energy demands, and corresponding environmental externalities of energy consumption.

Evidently, both China and the EU have turned to foreign policy leverages to enhance energy security and to satisfy domestic demands. More often than not, foreign policies are directed to stress the competitive aspect in the relation between China and EU as energy demanders. For example, regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are usually devised to enhance relations between demanders and suppliers. The chapters in the first part of The Globalization of Energy, however, offer insights as to how cooperative relations between demanders are not only necessary, but also possible. Especially with regard to China and the European Union, the two regions’ similarity in domestic energy policy structure warrants a closer tie, so as to learn from each other.

The second part of the book reviews efforts to tap the potential of renewable energy in China, the European Union and beyond. The chapters cast doubt on the feasibility of renewable energy. By examining the history and current status of energy efficiency and sustainable development policies in China, Japan, and the Netherlands, the four chapters reach a consensus that the development of renewable energy is not only hampered by high costs of such, but also by a variety of institutional barriers. In China, the renewable energy sector relies heavily on state subsidies and has little incentive to develop

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Every society faces the problem of death and the concrete issues of body disposal, funerary rites and commemorative practices. Satsuki Kawano’s volume focuses on one example for dealing with death that has emerged in contemporary Japan. Her book examines the renewed custom of scattering of the ashes of the dead after cremation.

Satsuki Kawano’s volume focuses on one example for dealing with death that has emerged in contemporary Japan. Her book examines the renewed custom of scattering of the ashes of the dead after cremation. The next chapter is about the scattering ceremonies themselves. It takes readers through the various preparations for the rite (including the grinding of the bones so that the remains can be scattered in the wind or dispersed in mountain forests). It also includes a description of three actual ceremonies that took place and that Kawano documented (she provides some black and white photographs to enhance her analysis). These concrete depictions are important because they further underline the diversity found within a common practice. The fifth chapter is again an excellent analysis of family relations as they are played out in and around the scattering of ashes. She focuses not only on the changing patterns of intergenerational relations, but also on the ways in which various aspects of the practice of ash scattering are contested. Indeed, in this chapter and throughout the volume, Kawano is careful to clarify that the practice is sometimes criticized for being selfish. The volume’s conclusion reiterates her main thesis about the new practice as one example of greater choice for the elderly, but not a disconnect from younger generations.

I found the volume to be very well written, theoretically sophisticated and well placed in comparative frames. While this is a book about Japan and a Japanese expression of new alternatives emerging in aging societies around the world, it will appeal to a wider readership.

Eyal Ben-Ari

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The book, “Globalization of Energy,” deviates from the conventional understanding of globalization as the flow of goods and services per se. Instead, the book brings together studies of the socio-political dynamism that either promotes or hinders the global flow of energy. It is therefore more about policies, geopolitical contention and domestic conditions in the globalized era – consequences of and reactions to globalization. Globalization is taken as a given, and therefore is not the subject of the volume. Thus, interested readers should not be distracted by this slightly deceptive title.

This book would be a suited starting point for scholars doing research on the effect of energy shortages on international relations, or conversely, the effect of international contention on energy policies. The collection exhibits the breadth that is necessary for a systematic understanding of the issue. This volume is also ideal for specialists in Chinese or European domestic energy policies who wish to explore the international implications of such. Thought-provoking as it is, the chapters invite readers to further explore the issues and stakes that comprise the contemporary scene of international energy diplomacy, not only between China and the European Union, but on a truly global scale.

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