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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SECURITIZATION OF OIL AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: The oil crises of the 1970s revealed the vulnerability of the United States to disruptions in global oil supply. These events pushed policymakers to frame oil not only as an economic commodity but as a national security concern. This article examines how the securitization of oil shaped U.S. foreign policy from the 1970s onward.

Methods: The study uses qualitative historical analysis and applies securitization theory from the Copenhagen School to evaluate policy documents, historical records, and academic literature. It traces how political leaders constructed oil as a security threat and how this framing influenced U.S. policy responses.

Results: Findings show that the 1973 Oil Embargo and the 1979 Energy Crisis triggered a durable shift in U.S. strategic thinking. Oil became embedded in national security discourse, legitimizing extraordinary measures such as the Carter Doctrine, a permanent military presence in the Persian Gulf, strengthened alliances, and long-term energy diversification measures. The securitization of oil also produced unintended geopolitical consequences.

Conclusion: Oil securitization reshaped U.S. foreign policy by reinforcing a cycle in which perceived threats to energy access justified increased military and diplomatic engagement. With global energy transitions accelerating, more sustainable approaches emphasizing diplomacy and diversification are needed.

KEYWORDS

Oil Securitization, U.S. Foreign Policy, Energy Security, Persian Gulf

1. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of energy security and foreign policy has become increasingly critical in the 21st century. Oil is an essential resource for modern economies and a central element of foreign policy. It is additionally a key element in specific discussions of energy security. The United States (U.S.), with meaningful energy needs and global interests, has long struggled to secure its oil supplies (Victor et al., 2006). This essay explores how framing oil as a vital security concern has moulded U.S. foreign policy, especially when facing a fragile oil supply during the oil crises of the 1970s. This essay argues that the oil crises of the 1970s caused oil securitization in U.S. foreign policy, which drove military interventions, alliances, and energy diversification to ensure continued access to energy. This essay will explore the sufficient historical context of oil crises, a suitable concept of securitization, and the resulting military, diplomatic, and economic strategies the U.S. employs to secure its oil interests. It will also address counterarguments and criticisms of the securitization of oil; it includes the role of market forces and limits to a security approach within a shifting global climate (Novikau, 2023).

1.1 The Oil Crises and the Vulnerability of Supply

The 1970s were a wild period for global energy markets, marked by two significant oil crises that exposed the vulnerability of industrialized nations, including the United States, to disruptions in oil supply.

1.1.1 The 1973 Oil Embargo

The 1973 Oil Embargo marked one definite point for global energy policy. Triggered by the Yom Kippur War, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) initiated a complete oil embargo against the U.S. and other Western nations in response to their support for Israel. This action was a deliberate use of energy as an economic weapon. The impact was immediate and substantial, as the oil price skyrocketed from \$2.5 per barrel to \$11.6 per barrel within two years, a staggering 350% increase (Martin-Moreno, 2014).

The economic consequences were dire, as the world GDP growth plummeted to almost 2.5% in 1974 and almost 1.5% in 1975, considerably lower than the 5.1% average of that previous decade (Martin-Moreno, 2014). The embargo highlighted the West's reliance upon Middle Eastern oil, making deep economic problems visible. Inflation, in particular, was just one of the problems, along with stagnation and unemployment. The cost of importing more expensive oil harmed the balance of payments of the U.S. and other importing countries. Comprehending the range of consequences that the 1973 shock brought provides valuable lessons for managing most energy crises in the future.

1.1.2 The 1979 Energy Crisis

The Iranian Revolution influenced the 1979 Energy Crisis. The unrest in

Iran, which grew during 1978, caused a stoppage of Iran's oil output. The Iranian exports came to a halt in November 1978. They stopped again briefly in early 1979, then resumed at a slower pace. Although other countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, increased production to offset a drop in Iranian exports, the fear of spreading chaos with disruption for marketing channels led to an estimated 10 percent drop in oil prices in international markets. As Saudi Arabia cut back its production (Painter, 2014), oil prices rose from \$14.08 a barrel in 1978 to \$31.61 in 1979 and then \$36.83 in 1980.

The rise in oil prices led to more economic decline and increased energy insecurity. Events within Iran demonstrated to U.S. policymakers that one prior strategy for relying on regional surrogates protecting Western interests throughout the Middle East was no longer viable. Reports that the Soviet Union might run out of oil made worries about Soviet goals in the Persian Gulf grow. The Iranian Revolution, in its aftermath of the 1973 Oil Embargo, highlighted the particular degree of vulnerability that energy-importing nations have toward political instability in major oil-producing regions (Painter, 2014). As James Schlesinger, America's initial Secretary of Energy (1977-1979), observed, such periods frequently oscillated between complacency and panic. The price increases throughout 1979-80 were not solely due to OPEC's market power but additionally a result of "panic buying and counterproductive actions by major oil importers" who anticipated chronic supply constraints (Martin-Moreno, 2014). Conflicting government policies in the U.S., in addition to price controls and subsidies, worsened this situation, protecting consumers yet disincentivizing domestic production. The 1979 Energy Crisis highlighted the importance of energy security as a central issue internationally, showing that political events can become economic and energy problems (Morey & Goel, 1993).

1.2 The Concept of Oil Vulnerability in U.S. Strategic Thinking

The concept of oil vulnerability in U.S. planning has been a meaningful and evolving concern, deeply rooted in the nation's high oil consumption and historical reliance on foreign sources. This vulnerability centers on the idea that disruptions to oil supply due to political instability, intentional actions by other nations, or unforeseen events may have severe consequences for U.S. national security and economic prosperity (Glaser, 2013).

A key aspect of this oil vulnerability has been relying on Middle Eastern oil. The Persian Gulf contains almost the world's largest readily available oil reserves. For decades, the U.S. has relied on imports from this area to meet a meaningful portion of its energy needs (Walsh, 2007). Several reasons explain why this dependence is a key vulnerability. Firstly, the political instability of the Middle East has always posed a risk to the steady flow of oil. Events such as the 1973 Oil Embargo and the 1979 Energy Crisis depicted how political decisions and revolutions could lead to reductions in oil supply and elevated prices, triggering downturns (Painter, 2014).

The concentration of oil reserves within several countries and the potential for significant energy suppliers such as Iran and Venezuela to use their oil resources in pursuit of policies opposing U.S. interests exacerbate this vulnerability. Transit routes such as the Strait of Hormuz are planned pressure points. These points could disrupt the global oil trade (Victor et al., 2006). Even if the U.S. cut oil imports, its allies' reliance on Middle Eastern oil would limit U.S. foreign policy because of mutual ties.

Over time, the threat perception has evolved. This perception is associated with oil vulnerability. During the Cold War, there was significant concern over the potential for the Soviet Union to gain control or deny access to Middle Eastern oil. That would weaken the West. The "Carter Doctrine" of 1980, which declared the Persian Gulf a region with vital U.S. interests, was in part a response to this perceived Soviet threat (Peters, 2002). The rise of aggressive revolutionary oil-producing states, the threat from terrorism targeting oil infrastructure, and the increase in competition for resources with rapidly growing economies like China have shaped U.S. threat perceptions of oil security. Another key worry involves possible disturbances from regional foes or domestic issues within large oil countries such as Saudi Arabia (Glaser, 2013).

Furthermore, the particular concept of an "oil weapon," where oil-ex-

porting countries can refuse to sell oil for political leverage, such as that of the 1973 embargo, has been a continued fear. While some argue whether the direct link between oil dependence and military conflict is always clear, the perceived need for securing reliable and affordable oil supplies has historically been a significant factor influencing U.S. foreign policy and military posture in tactically important oil-rich regions. The concept of "oil scarcity ideology," even though frequently proven wrong through market realities, has also historically driven aggressive U.S. policies for securing foreign oil (Stern, 2016).

2. THE SECURITIZATION OF OIL IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

The securitization of oil in U.S. foreign policy becomes clear through the theoretical lens offered by the Copenhagen School, positing security as a socially constructed reality, not an objective condition. Under this framework, securitization occurs when actors frame an issue as a threat to existence. It warrants extraordinary measures that go beyond procedures that are normal within politics. This process involves a speech act, through which a securitizing actor declares a particular issue as a threat to a referent object, convincing a relevant audience to accept this framing (Özcan, 2013). In the context of U.S. foreign policy, the referent object has often been national security and economic stability. At the same time, the securitizing actors have included multiple presidents, policymakers, and influential voices within the energy industry (Victor et al., 2006).

The success of securitization depends upon the persuasive power within the speech act and the audience's receptiveness. For instance, the Carter Declaration in 1980 was one securitizing move of importance. This statement transformed the region into a strategic priority, justifying a permanent military presence and a willingness to use force to protect oil supplies. The American public, anxious about energy shortages and economic instability in the oil crises of the 1970s, was receptive to framing. This receptiveness was important in legitimizing extraordinary measures, such as increased military spending and interventionist policies within the Middle East (Painter, 2014; Stern, 2016). At first, the Copenhagen School characterized energy, including oil, as an economic referent object, subject to market forces and concerns about supply and affordability in the economic sector. However, when actors securitize oil, discussions shift from typical economic concerns, such as price fluctuations and trade balances, to security concerns. Those concerns necessitate urgent and extraordinary actions. As a result, disruptions in oil supply, sudden price spikes in oil, or control over oil resources might be presented not just as economic challenges but as threats to national survival, political stability, or the fundamental well-being of the population (Novikau, 2023; Christou & Adamides, 2013). For example, policymakers could frame a threat of oil supply interruption as endangering the functioning of the economy or the state's military capabilities, thus elevating it to national security rather than just a market imbalance.

Many scholars view the 1973 Oil Crisis as a historical turning point at which global actors started to securitize energy, moving energy into high politics and justifying extraordinary measures to prevent future dangers. Likewise, the 2006 attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq oil facility caused oil securitization in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states by framing it within anti-terrorism, thus showing how oil was a direct security threat, not just an economic asset (Crystal, 2018). Thus, through securitization, oil transcends its status as an economic commodity and becomes a central element within national and international security discourses, potentially justifying actions unacceptable under political circumstances.

3. MILITARY AND STRATEGIC RESPONSES

Establishing a U.S. military presence within the Persian Gulf is a calculated response that evolved, driven by a perceived need for secure access to the region's oil resources and to maintain stability. At first, after Great Britain declared its intention to withdraw its military forces from the Persian Gulf before the close of 1971, the U.S. looked to regional surrogates, mainly Iran under the Shah and Saudi Arabia, to safeguard Western interests. In 1972, the Nixon administration gave essentially to the Shah of Iran a "blank check" for the purchase of U.S. weapons. U.S. policymakers had envisioned Saudi Arabia as a place to maintain spare oil production capacity. That was their vision. However, the 1979 Iranian Revolution considerably altered this strategy, as revolutionary forces

overthrew the Shah, leading to regional instability and a perceived threat to oil supplies (Painter, 2014). This event convinced U.S. policymakers that relying merely on regional partners was insufficient.

U.S. worries about Persian Gulf security grew due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, warned that the total Soviet influence could spread and jeopardize vital U.S. interests. Those interests were oil and the Middle East (Stern, 2016). President Carter articulated the whole Carter Doctrine in his 1980 State of the Union address in reaction to that specific perceived threat. According to this doctrine, "an attempt by any outside power to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force" (Painter, 2014).

The U.S. took specific steps to establish a greater military presence and improve its regional power projection capabilities to strengthen the Carter Doctrine. These steps included improving "military surge capabilities," establishing a permanent military presence in the region, creating the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force in March 1980 to improve the ability to deploy forces quickly, beginning negotiations to secure access to military facilities in the region, as well as making preparations to preposition military equipment on land and special ships (Painter, 2014).

In January 1981, the Carter administration made the Persian Gulf a top priority for resources in the Five-Year Defense Plan and the second most important, after Western Europe, in wartime operations planning. This decision marked an important shift towards a more direct and substantial U.S. military presence within the Persian Gulf, with the primary objective being that of safeguarding U.S. vital interests, most notably the reliable flow of oil, as well as countering perceived threats originating from external powers (Glaser, 2013). This stance did continue and evolved within subsequent decades, as can be seen in the time of the 1991 Gulf War, which some argue was explicitly fought over oil for the prevention of Iraq from controlling a meaningful portion of the region's reserves. The U.S. military presence has since been a key instrument in its energy security strategy; it is targeted at deterring aggression, protecting sea lanes for oil transport, and ensuring stability in a region critical to global oil supply (Stern, 2016). Establishing this presence can be understood as a direct response to the securitization of oil. Policymakers view disruptions to supply as existential threats that may require military intervention if necessary (Novikau, 2023).

3.1 Diplomatic and Economic Strategies

The United States has historically employed diplomatic and economic strategies to ensure oil security, focusing on strengthening its relationships with key oil-producing states and pursuing energy diversification.

3.1.1 Strengthening Alliances with Key Oil-Producing States

Cultivating strong relationships with key oil-producing nations has been a meaningful diplomatic strategy. Such nations are mainly in the Middle East (Novikau, 2023). For a long time, the U.S. relied upon countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran (under the Shah) as regional pillars in order to safeguard its oil interests. This approach primarily targeted a guaranteed stable oil supply against potential threats. Saudi Arabia remained an important partner even after the Iranian Revolution. The U.S. sought to stabilize global markets. However, these relationships remain complex and still involve balancing energy interests with other foreign policy objectives, such as promoting social reform and human rights (Victor et al., 2006).

The U.S. has additionally sought to engage other meaningful producers, such as Russia. This engagement happened despite political differences (until the Ukraine War), given its role as a major exporter of both oil and gas. Encouraging foreign investment and technology transfer to Russia's energy sector has been seen as a way to maintain and expand global oil supplies (Martin-Moreno, 2014; Victor et al., 2006). Furthermore, along with the rise of emerging economies, the importance of engaging with new major energy consumers like China and India has become

obvious, especially in creating efficient policies for energy security. To coordinate planned reserves as well as responses to supply disruptions, the U.S. has been urged to collaborate with these nations by way of existing institutions such as the International Energy Agency (IEA) or a strengthened International Energy Forum (IEF) (Martin-Moreno, 2014).

Pursuing relatively stable relationships in oil-producing nations also involves managing political sensitivities, as dependence on foreign oil can sometimes lead to pressures for political accommodations in exchange for consistently stable energy supplies. Furthermore, the U.S. has used its economic influence to offer potentially preferential market access for producing countries, supporting a free energy market (Victor et al., 2006).

3.1.2 Energy Diversification Efforts

For economic reasons, the U.S. has pursued energy diversification through several avenues to reduce its vulnerability to disruptions from specific regions and producers. A key strategy aims to diminish dependence on imports and apply further pressure to world oil prices by increasing domestic oil and gas production, including unconventional sources like tar sands and oil shale. The U.S. government has also supported investment in new energy technologies across various sectors, which include higher-efficiency vehicles, substitutes for oil in transportation (such as biomass and biofuels), and energy source alternatives, like solar, wind, and nuclear power. These efforts are designed to reduce the economy's overall reliance on oil and to create a more resilient energy system (Novikau, 2023; Victor et al., 2006).

3.2 Criticism and Counterarguments

The securitization of oil has been a continued theme in U.S. foreign policy, but it is not without several critics. Some argue that market forces and economic strategies could be more effective and less costly than military and diplomatic interventions.

3.2.1 The Role of Market Forces vs. Security Concerns

Critics argue that certain economic means, rather than military intervention, could manage multiple energy crises. They suggest that certain market mechanisms, such as calculated petroleum reserves and diversified supply chains, are essential for stability and can reduce the impact of supply disruptions without the need for military engagement (Novikau, 2023). The economic management of crises involves adjusting certain prices and reflecting supply and demand, which can incentivize increased production and reduced consumption.

Furthermore, developing several futures markets and other financial instruments allows for hedging against price volatility, reducing the economic impact of sudden price spikes (Victor et al., 2006). The argument for market-based solutions equally notes the potential for overreaction and unexpected outcomes tied to securitization. Military interventions and aggressive diplomatic strategies can destabilize regions, disrupt trade, and create new security risks, potentially exacerbating the problems they aim to solve (Novikau, 2023).

The increasing influence of both China and Russia in the global energy markets poses meaningful challenges to the U.S. energy security strategies. China has become a meaningful factor in oil and gas exploration and production, notably in Africa and Latin America. China's forging of large economic bonds with many oil-producing nations has reduced the leverage of the U.S. in these regions. Additionally, alternative supply routes for oil were created (Novikau, 2023). With its huge oil and gas reserves, Russia has expanded its influence in Europe and Asia, challenging the customary dominance of the U.S. and its allies in the energy sector. Competition regarding resources and influence involving these major powers has complicated the energy security landscape, making it more difficult for the U.S. to unilaterally control or secure oil supplies (Victor et al., 2006).

More alternative definitions for security might then provide more sustainable solutions. Human security reframes oil dependency as a social issue, thus stressing equitable resource distribution and poverty alleviation. Ecological security highlights the ecological risks associated with

oil production, encouraging renewable energy transitions and climate resilience measures. These methods contest standard state-focused notions of security, arguing that durability over time is achieved by sustainability, not militarization.

Tackling oil through just a security lens has certain cultural and economic impacts. In terms of culture, it reinforces narratives of a nationalist and sectarian nature that deepen divisions within the region, like Sunni-Shia tensions, increased by competition over resources. Securitization economically strengthens rentier states, which deters diversification and heightens susceptibility to oil price shocks. Furthermore, it enables authoritarian regimes to consolidate their power by leveraging oil revenues mainly for military spending instead of social development (Crystal, 2018).

3.2.2 De-Securitization of Oil

Certain scholars and policymakers advocate for the de-securitization of oil, arguing that framing oil as a strictly economic commodity can lead to more stable and cooperative international relations (Christou & Adamides, 2013). De-securitization involves shifting focus from military and security strategies to economic or diplomatic solutions, such as through the promotion of free trade, the diversification of energy sources, and investment in renewable energy technologies. This approach stresses the mutual benefits of energy cooperation and seeks the reduction of potential conflict over resources (Novikau, 2023).

De-securitization also challenges the narrative that oil is a scarce and truly indispensable resource (Stern, 2016). Through promoting energy efficiency and investing in alternative energy sources, it is possible to reduce dependence on oil. It is also possible to reduce the risks tied to supply disruptions (Christou & Adamides, 2013). This approach recognizes that energy security is not solely about securing access to oil but also about creating a more sustainable and resilient energy system (Glaser, 2013).

De-securitization for oil throughout the Middle East is theoretically possible but faces meaningful challenges due to deeply secured geopolitical and economic dynamics. Oil securitization, especially within GCC states, was historically shaped by its key influence on state formation, class structures, and regional power struggles (Crystal, 2018). Oil revenues, for instance, let rulers distance themselves from the business elite and form new rule systems, firming up their power. Framing oil in this way as a security issue has justified militarization and external intervention. It is potentially perpetuating instability (Novikau, 2023).

De-securitization would necessitate significant structural changes, such as economic diversification to decrease reliance on oil revenues and the establishment of various regional cooperation frameworks for equitable resource management. Lessons from certain historical examples, such as the European Coal and Steel Community, suggest that multilateral governance can sometimes transform resource-based conflicts into cooperative relationships.

However, energy security concerns inevitably shape the states' foreign policy, encouraging intervention to prevent or reduce threats. Even though military intervention has been considered a legitimate solution in security studies, its high political and economic costs make other measures, like international cooperation and diversification, more promising (Novikau, 2023).

The relationship between political securitization and the possibility of energy cooperation is critical. The connection is important. In cases where political relations show a low level of securitization, energy agreements have a higher likelihood, and they can reinforce normalized relations, as we see within the case of Israel and Egypt. In contrast, deep securitization inside political and military sectors can prevent energy collaborations with mutual benefits, as exemplified by historical difficulties between Israel and Iran and Israel and the Palestinian authorities. In those instances, energy issues become subsumed within the existing political and military securitization (Christou & Adamides, 2013).

Ultimately, while the de-securitization of oil promises to encourage better stability and cooperation, its realization in the Middle East requires overcoming deeply rooted political, economic, and security considerations. A shift towards viewing oil chiefly through an economic lens, alongside joint efforts towards diversification, cooperation, and alternative energy development, would be necessary to navigate this complex terrain (Peters, 2002).

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has shown how oil securitization largely influenced U.S. foreign policy, especially after the oil crisis during the 1970s. The energy crises during the 1970s, resulting from crude oil scarcity, brought the question of energy security into the discourse of security studies. The 1970s oil crisis highlighted direct relationships between energy and security. Foreign policy had direct relationships, too (Novikau, 2023). Since the 1970's oil crisis, energy supply security has been a key component of U.S. foreign policy pursued via geopolitics. The first oil shock highlighted the dependence of the West on the oil of the Middle East (Painter, 2014). U.S. policymakers justified such extraordinary measures by framing oil as a fundamental existential threat, involving military interventions, calculated alliances, and energy diversification efforts. The Carter Doctrine and the subsequent establishment of a permanent U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf exemplify concrete outcomes of this securitization process (Peters, 2002).

However, using the securitization framework often reveals a multi-dimensional and ambivalent legacy. Even though the securitization of oil plausibly served U.S. interests in the short term by ensuring access to vital energy resources and deterring potential disruptions, it further produced unexpected outcomes. The long-term military presence within the Middle East has been costly in terms of financial resources, human lives, and regional stability (Peters, 2002; Victor et al., 2006). Furthermore, prioritizing security concerns over economic and diplomatic considerations has sometimes distorted market signals, exacerbated tensions with oil-producing states, and obstructed the development of more sustainable energy policies (Stern, 2016).

Furthermore, the securitization of oil has further contributed to a predictable cycle involving threat and response. By framing oil as a rather critical vulnerability, the U.S. has already perpetuated a security dilemma for the Middle East, where its actions to secure oil supplies are often perceived by other actors as aggressive and destabilizing, thus prompting further cycles of securitization (Peters, 2002). Given changes in global energy and new problems, like climate change, plus more renewable sources, continuing oil securitization reliance may not be productive. Alternative approaches prioritizing diplomacy, economic cooperation, and sustainable energy transitions may offer more effective pathways. These approaches may additionally offer less costly routes to energy security in the long run (Novikau, 2023). This analysis shows that the oil securitization that defines U.S. foreign policy needs reassessment to navigate the 21st-century energy complexities.

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