

Opec and allies may need to change course as oil inventories rise: Panel



LONDON/RIYADH (Reuters) – OPEC signaled on Thursday it may have to return to oil production cuts as global inventories rise, in a statement that may further sour relations with U.S. President Donald Trump.

The president has repeatedly lashed out at the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, saying it is not supplying enough oil. OPEC, plus Russia and other allied non-OPEC producers agreed to pump more in June.

An OPEC and non-OPEC ministerial panel concluded that supply is “very comfortable” compared to demand and warned producers may need a change of tack because of rising inventories and economic uncertainties.

“The committee, however, expressed concerns about rising inventories in recent weeks and also noted looming macroeconomic uncertainties which may require changing course,” a statement issued by OPEC said.

Brent crude oil, the global benchmark, has lost about \$10 a barrel since hitting a four-year high of \$86.74 on Oct. 3, on signs of ample supply even as U.S. sanctions on Iran aimed at cutting the OPEC member’s oil exports loom.

For now, producers are making progress in increasing production in line with the June agreement.

OPEC and its partners agreed in June to lift oil supplies so that compliance with output curbs in place since January 2017 falls to 100 percent, from closer to 150 percent because of declining production in some countries.

Countries complied with 111 percent of pledged supply curbs in September, the statement said, meaning production increased from August when adherence was 129 percent.

The panel, called the Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee, can make recommendations but does not set policy. OPEC and its allies hold their next policy meeting in December.

Forecasters, including the International Energy Agency, expect slower growth in global oil demand next year and rising supplies from outside OPEC, which could further increase inventories if OPEC keeps output at the same level.

The ministerial panel asked its technical group, called the Joint Technical Committee, to “continue to study the 2019 outlook and present options on 2019 production levels to prevent re-emergence of a market imbalance.”

Earlier on Thursday, top exporter Saudi Arabia said the oil market could be oversupplied in the fourth quarter of the year as stocks rise and demand slows. It said it will “mirror” such

changes in its production.

“We are of the view that the market in the fourth quarter could be shifting towards an oversupply situation as evidenced by rising inventories over the past few weeks,” Saudi OPEC governor Adeb Al-Aama told Reuters.

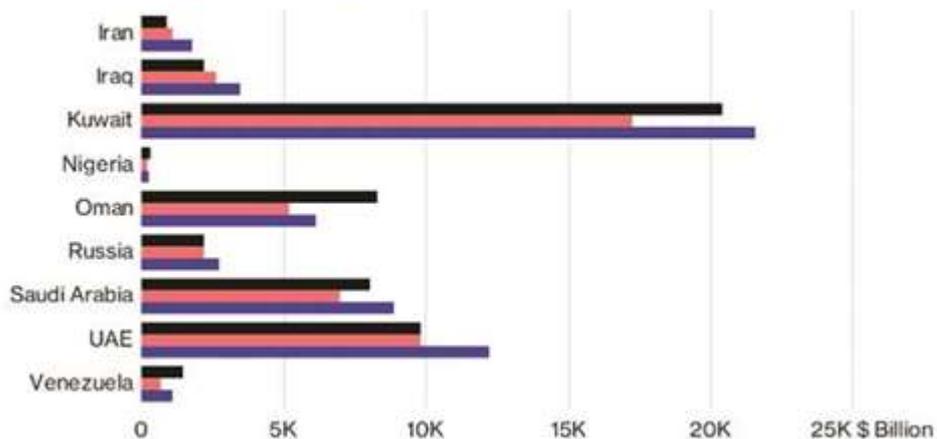
The OPEC governor is typically one of the most senior posts in a country’s OPEC delegation after the energy minister.

Petro-states have got a problem with their economies, says IEA

Boom and Bust

The outlook for producer countries' income from oil and gas varies widely

■ 2010-2017 ■ 2018-2015 ■ 2026-2040



Estimates from New Policies Scenario
International Energy Agency

Bloomberg

Bloomberg/London

Countries heavily reliant on oil and gas for revenue must diversify their economies or face worsening finances, the

International Energy Agency warns in a new report.

While revenue for petro-states has always fluctuated in boom-and-bust price cycles, this time is different. Surging US shale production, the expansion of renewables and increases in energy efficiency pose a more fundamental challenge.

“Now, more than at any other point in recent history, fundamental changes to the development model look unavoidable,” IEA executive director Fatih Birol said in an interview. “Countries cannot afford to base their economies on oil and gas revenue only. It’s high time to diversify their economies.”

The most obvious answer to the diversification question, particularly for Middle Eastern producers, is to ramp up solar power capacity, the IEA says.

Around 2mn bpd of oil is used for electricity generation in the Arabian Gulf, according to Birol. “This is very inefficient. It’s like using Chanel perfume to fuel your car,” he said.

Prices will come under pressure over the long term, the IEA says, because of rising US shale oil production, increased energy efficiency and policies to curb climate change and local air pollution.

“A big amount of shale oil is coming onto the market,” Birol said. “We expect between now and 2030 more than 50% of global oil production growth will come from shale oil.”

Since the price crash in 2014, net income from oil and gas has plunged for producer countries. For Iraq the drop was around 40%; for Venezuela it was as much as 70%.

The risk of failing to diversify away from oil and gas is outlined in the IEA’s Low Oil Price Case scenario, where it assumes crude settles in a range between \$60 to \$70 a barrel. In the Middle East, this would equate to a \$1,500 drop, compared to the IEA’s base case New Policies Scenario, in average annual disposable income per person, the IEA said. In countries with rising, young populations in need of jobs this would be critical.

If crude prices average around \$60-70 a barrel between now and

2040, net oil and gas income across the industry will never recover to 2010 to 2015 levels, the IEA said. This would lead to a cumulative \$7tn loss in revenue, through to 2040.

“Without far-reaching reforms, this would translate into large current account deficits, downward pressure on currencies and lower government spending,” the report said.

Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, a plan to wean its economy off oil, was unveiled in 2016 to much fanfare but concrete reforms have been lacklustre. While the IEA stops short of singling out the world’s largest oil exporter as being especially at risk, it highlights how the kingdom remains “heavily dependent on hydrocarbon revenues today” despite having first expressed a desire to diversify its economy back in 1970.

The IEA says that how these producer countries adapt is crucial, not just for the survival of their own economies but also for global energy security and environmental sustainability. Maintaining investment in low-cost and low-carbon energy resources is vital.

The disadvantages of being heavily dependent on oil and gas revenues are evident in the recent history of the global economy, the IEA said.

“Producer economies have not performed significantly better in economic terms than non-producers in recent years, despite having access to vast revenue streams from oil and gas,” the report said. “More than at any other point in recent history, fundamental changes to the development model in resource-rich countries look unavoidable.”

Opec and allies may ‘need to

change course' as oil inventories rise



Reuters/London/Riyadh

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ECB sticks to stimulus exit, downplaying uncertainties



Reuters/Frankfurt

The European Central Bank stuck to plans yesterday to claw back unprecedented stimulus, even as the growth outlook continues to darken and political turmoil in Italy looms large over the currency bloc.

Having exhausted much of its firepower with years of support, the ECB reaffirmed that its €2.6tn (\$3tn) asset purchase scheme will end this year and interest rates could rise after next summer, sticking to guidance first unveiled in June and repeated at every meeting since.

While he acknowledged a loss of growth momentum and a “bunch of uncertainties” from trade protectionism and market volatility, ECB President Mario Draghi played down concerns, arguing that the eurozone was merely returning to a normal or natural pace of expansion after an exceptional 2017.

“We’re talking about weaker momentum, not a downturn,” Draghi told a news conference after policymakers decided to maintain a long-standing assessment that growth risks were “broadly

balanced”.

“Is this enough of a change to make us change the baseline scenario? The answer is ‘No’,” he said, adding that the ECB did not even contemplate extending its bond purchase programme, which has depressed borrowing costs and revived growth.

The comments appeared to confirm already solid expectations that the ECB will not go back on its pledge to end bond purchases by the close of the year, even if the growth outlook continues to weaken.

“The ECB remains highly determined to bring net asset purchases to an end,” ING economist Carsten Brzeski said.”

It would require a severe downturn of the economy, not only weaker momentum, in the coming six weeks for the ECB to alter its course.”

Focusing on inflation, the bank’s primary mandate, Draghi struck a positive tone, arguing that wage growth was a “very comforting” sign and that policymakers remained confident that price growth will rise.

But despite the hawkish message – which included an upbeat assessment of firmer wage pressures – the euro slipped on his comment that Europe’s monetary union remained “fragile” as long as measures to shore up existing structures were not complete.

“And when I say completed, I mean the banking union, I mean the capital market union,” he added of measures initiated as a result of the sovereign debt crisis of almost a decade ago but which have foundered on a lack of consensus among member states.

The single currency slipped 0.1% on the day to \$1.138 after having earlier reached a session-high of \$1.143.

With the EU having taken the unprecedented step of rejecting Italy’s budget this week, Draghi was quizzed at length about the escalating political fight between Rome and Brussels.

He made it abundantly clear that the ECB would not come to Italy’s aid.

Himself an Italian, Draghi said he was confident compromise

would be reached between Brussels and Rome and noted how much the stand-off was already costing Italy because of the rising yield on its government debt.

“Our mandate... is a mandate towards price stability, not towards financing governments’ deficits,” Draghi said.

He said rising bond yields were already eating into Italy’s fiscal capacity, suggesting that attempts to raise spending would be counterproductive as investors will punish Rome for spending too much.

With a debt to GDP ratio of 130%, Italy is the eurozone’s second most indebted country after Greece, and under its rejected budget proposal, this debt level is unlikely to fall. “I’m still confident an agreement will be found,” Draghi added.

Asked about the risk that a fall in the value of Italian government bonds could erode the capital positions of some banks that hold them, he said: “I don’t have a crystal ball...

These bonds are in the banks’ portfolios.

They are denting into the capital position of the banks.

Economists said the message to Rome was clear: that the ECB will not come to its aid and it should prepare for life after years of central bank support.

“The ECB is not about to run to Italy’s rescue, even if market conditions deteriorated further,” Nordea economist Jan von Gerich said.

Global natural gas rally seen wavering as buyers expand

horizons



The upside to global natural gas prices is seen limited as competition with other energy intensifies. Benchmarks in Asia and Europe have soared since mid2016, leaving buyers in those regions paying triple the rate in the US, where prices kept in a much narrower range. While that's been good for the profits of big producers, it left users hesitant to boost use of the cleanest fossil fuel. "In the power sector, there are many competitors for natural gas, renewables being one of them and coal on the other side," Fatih Birol, executive director of Paris-based energy policy adviser the International Energy Agency, said in an interview earlier this month. "If the price of natural gas goes up, there may be a question for demand growth." An expected liquefied natural gas boom, with record supply growth next year and as much as \$200bn earmarked for new projects in the next three years, may help pare prices outside North America. With the world transiting away from dirtier coal, strong demand seems pretty certain, but high prices aren't, said Tatiana Mitrova, director of the energy

sector at the Moscow School of Management. Customers are too clever, she said, citing Germany's promotion of LNG import projects in a bid to win lower prices from Gazprom, the world's biggest gas producer. The Russian company may also face lower prices in Asia, said Mitrova, who sits on the board of oil-services company Schlumberger Ltd. Gazprom knows the drill. It already suffered thin margins for some hub-market sales in Europe in 2015 and 2016, she said. "Gazprom was supplying gas at break-even prices," Mitrova said in an interview at the Oil & Money conference in London. "I'm afraid supplies to China might see the same development." With Russia, the Middle East, the US, Canada, Australia and Africa all competing to supply, prices will probably come under pressure, said Nick Campbell, director of energy intensive clients at Inspired Energy. Then there are other key areas of demand – gas users beyond power generators. The manufacturing sector is a "main driver" for demand growth during the coming years, and renewables probably aren't a viable alternative for many factories, the IEA's Birol said. So gas sellers will probably continue to enjoy premium prices until the new infrastructure forces them down, said John Baguley, chief operating officer of LNG Ltd, which plans to export North American gas to Europe and Asia. "If Gazprom is serious about putting the cheapest gas into Europe, Gazprom can do that cheaper than we can liquefy it out of the US," he said in an interview

The global economy's three games



By Jean Pisani-Ferry/Paris

Chess masters are able to play simultaneously on several boards with several partners. And the more time passes, the more US President Donald Trump's international economic strategy looks like such a match.

There are three major players: the United States, China, and a loose coalition formed by the other members of the G7. And there are three games, each of which involves all three players. Unlike chess, however, these games are interdependent. And no one – perhaps not even Trump – knows which game will take precedence.

On Trump's first board is the break the rules of trade game. Many in his administration regard the World Trade Organisation's principles and procedures as an obstacle to bilateral negotiations. They would prefer to clinch deals with partners one by one, without being bound by the obligation to apply liberalisation measures across the board and without being forced to abide by the rulings of the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism. Their aim is to restructure the trade relationships along a hub-and-spoke model, with the US at the centre.

The underlying reasoning is fairly simple: multilateral rules

always protect the weakest players. Why should the US refrain from using its overwhelming bargaining power? The recent United States-Mexico-Canada agreement (USMCA) shows the way, by imposing US-determined national content obligations on the other two countries and restraining their own trade policy options. More such deals should follow.

Europe, Japan, and China have all criticised the US stance and portray themselves as champions of multilateralism. This is only half true: Europe has built its own web of trade agreements, and China, itself a fairly transactional power, regards global rules as an embodiment of yesterday's Western dominance. But on this issue (as on climate change), there is currently more commonality among non-US partners than there is between them and the US.

On the second board is the discipline China game. For a decade or so, many in the US have claimed that China's categorisation as a developing country, and the resulting favourable treatment it enjoys at the WTO, do not reflect the true strength of an economy whose goods exports amount to \$2tn, or 11% of world trade. As Susan Schwab, President George W Bush's Trade Representative, put it back in 2011, in trade discussions elephants were hiding behind mice. The Trump administration now wants to trap the Chinese elephant.

The internal heterogeneity of China's economy is indeed exceptionally high for a developing country. Parts of China are poor, and parts wealthy. Some industries are unsophisticated, while others are at the cutting edge of innovation. The latter shouldn't hide behind the former.

America's grievances regarding China's behaviour, from its treatment of intellectual property to its implicit and explicit subsidies and policy-motivated takeovers of foreign industrial jewels, are essentially shared by its G7 partners. Many Chinese experts also agree that ending the wholesale subsidisation of industrial behemoths and letting market signals play a stronger role in investment choices is in their country's best interest.

More generally, China's partners argue that trade rules

conceived for market economies are not adequate when dealing with a centrally-directed economy. This claim is more contentious, because leaders in Beijing regard state ownership of enterprises as a matter of sovereign choice, and do not want to renounce big industrial policy endeavours. But there is room for discussion. All in all, the discipline China game is one in which the US, Europe, Japan, and Canada are largely aligned. All look forward to a robust negotiation with the Chinese.

This makes the discipline China game very different from the third contest, the roll back China game. This game is not about the enforcement of trade rules, or their design, but about the sheer geopolitical rivalry between the incumbent superpower and a rising challenger. As Kevin Rudd, the former Australian prime minister, noted in a remarkable speech a few weeks ago, the US security establishment has become convinced that strategic engagement with China has not paid off and should give way to strategic competition – a stance that would encompass all dimensions of the bilateral relationship. In early October, a particularly harsh speech by US Vice President Mike Pence illustrated Rudd's point.

Europe, Japan, and Canada are not part of this rivalry – they simply do not matter in the same way that the US and China do. But they are inevitably part of its diplomatic, economic, and, for Japan at least, security components. If the tension between the two powers dominates global politics in the decades to come, they won't be able to avoid taking a stance. And, for all their reluctance, they may well end up aligned with the US, for two reasons: a hardening of the rivalry with the US would drive the Chinese leadership further from Western values, and they ultimately depend on the US for their own security.

The problem, however, is that it is still not clear in which game President Trump intends to score a victory. Does he intend to play a long game? And, if so, what are his aims? Nobody really knows.

For the non-US G7 countries, this uncertainty creates a

dilemma. Should they engage with China on WTO reform and the strengthening of the associated disciplines? This is a topic on which they could help pave the way for an eventual global compromise. The risk, however, is that if China fears that the US really aims at winning the rollback game, and expects the rest of the West to fall in line eventually, it will refuse to make meaningful concessions.

Alternatively, the rest of the G7 could align with the US, at the risk of antagonising China and eventually being strategically demoted if Trump ultimately settles on a bilateral deal with Chinese President Xi Jinping. If that game prevails, the non-US G7 will end up being the losers.

Absent a no-risk strategy, Europe, Japan, and Canada might well choose to wait and see. This would be the surest way to be sidelined in all possible circumstances and provide a demonstration that only the US-Chinese “G2” matters. What these countries are facing is a test of leadership, which they may pass or fail. There is no third possibility. – Project Syndicate

l Jean Pisani-Ferry, a professor at the Hertie School of Governance (Berlin) and Sciences Po (Paris), holds the Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa chair at the European University Institute and is a senior fellow at Bruegel, a Brussels-based think-tank.

U.S. gas a no-go for Chinese buyers despite weaker tariff



TOKYO and SINGAPORE (Bloomberg) – Even with China’s smaller-than-threatened tariff on U.S. natural gas, American cargoes may still be kryptonite for Chinese traders trying to navigate the ongoing trade war.

Chinese buyers will seek to avoid purchasing U.S. liquefied natural gas as long as any tariffs are in place because of the risk that duties may rise further and possibly without warning, according to officials from four importers. While they said they would prioritize cargoes from other suppliers, they couldn’t entirely rule out buying U.S. shipments. The officials asked not to be identified discussing procurement strategy.

China announced Tuesday a 10% tariff on American goods, including LNG, starting Sept. 24 in retaliation for a similar-sized levy imposed by the U.S. That China struck below the 25% duty it threatened last month was met with relief, with gas futures in New York jumping more than 4% while companies that develop U.S. export projects, such as Tellurian Inc. and Cheniere Energy, saw their share’s rally.

But the ongoing trade tensions are seen turning off buyers in China, the world’s biggest and fastest-growing natural gas

market. That could go for both taking individual, or so-called spot, cargoes, as well as tying themselves to projects with long-term spending and supply commitments in the U.S., where more than a dozen projects are seeking about \$139 billion in investments.

“For a Chinese buyer, the overall risk profile for procuring U.S. LNG remains heightened,” Saul Kavonic, Credit Suisse Group’s director of Asia energy research, said by email. “Even with a smaller tariff, there has likely been some longstanding damage done to the perception of reliability of U.S. LNG supply in the eyes of Chinese buyers who will shape the next wave of global LNG projects.”

U.S. LNG sales are linked to the nation’s benchmark Henry Hub gas price, which is down about 1% this year, while supply from most other exporters is tied to oil, which has gained 18% over that period. That’s made American fuel cheaper than other sources, an advantage that’s being eroded by tariffs.

China may shift its buying from the U.S. to other exporters, including Australia, Qatar and Papua New Guinea, according to Bloomberg Intelligence analyst’s Lu Wang and Kunal Agrawal.

PetroChina Co. signed a deal earlier this month with Qatargas Operating to purchase 3.4 MM tons of LNG annually, the Chinese company’s biggest supply deal, while inking a mid-term contract with the PNG LNG project earlier this year. PetroChina’s parent, China National Petroleum, signed a deal to buy U.S. LNG from Cheniere in February. CNPC didn’t respond to requests for comment.

The global economy in 2018



By Michael Spence/Hong Kong

Economists like me are asked a set of recurring questions that might inform the choices of firms, individuals, and institutions in areas like investment, education, and jobs, as well as their policy expectations. In most cases, there is no definitive answer. But, with sufficient information, one can discern trends, in terms of economies, markets, and technology, and make reasonable guesses.

In the developed world, 2017 will likely be recalled as a period of stark contrast, with many economies experiencing growth acceleration, alongside political fragmentation, polarisation, and tension, both domestically and internationally. In the long run, it is unlikely that economic performance will be immune to centrifugal political and social forces. Yet, so far, markets and economies have shrugged off political disorder, and the risk of a substantial short-term setback seems relatively small.

The one exception is the United Kingdom, which now faces a messy and divisive Brexit process. Elsewhere in Europe, Germany's severely weakened chancellor, Angela Merkel, is

struggling to forge a coalition government. None of this is good for the UK or the rest of Europe, which desperately needs France and Germany to work together to reform the European Union.

One potential shock that has received much attention relates to monetary tightening. In view of improving economic performance in the developed world, a gradual reversal of aggressively accommodative monetary policy does not appear likely to be a major drag or shock to asset values. Perhaps the long-awaited upward convergence of economic fundamentals to validate market valuations is within reach.

In Asia, Chinese President Xi Jinping is in a stronger position than ever, suggesting that effective management of imbalances and more consumption- and innovation-driven growth can be expected. India also appears set to sustain its growth and reform momentum. As these economies grow, so will others throughout the region and beyond.

When it comes to technology, especially digital technology, China and the United States seem set to dominate for years to come, as they continue to fund basic research, reaping major benefits when innovations are commercialised. These two countries are also home to the major platforms for economic and social interaction, which benefit from network effects, closure of informational gaps, and, perhaps most important, artificial-intelligence capabilities and applications that use and generate massive sets of valuable data.

Such platforms are not just lucrative on their own; they also produce a host of related opportunities for new business models operating in and around them, in, say, advertising, logistics, and finance. Given this, economies that lack such platforms, such as the EU, are at a disadvantage. Even Latin America has a major innovative domestic e-commerce player (Mercado Libre) and a digital payments system (Mercado Pago).

In mobile online payments systems, China is in the lead. With much of the country's population having shifted directly from cash to mobile online payments – skipping checks and credit

cards – China's payments systems are robust.

Earlier last month on Singles' Day, an annual festival of youth-oriented consumption that has become the single largest shopping event in the world, China's leading online payment platform, Alipay, processed up to 256,000 payments per second, using a robust cloud computing architecture. There is also impressive scope for expanding financial services – from credit assessments to asset management and insurance – on the Alipay platform, and its expansion into other Asian countries via partnerships is well underway.

In the coming years, developed and developing economies will also have to work hard to shift toward more inclusive growth patterns. Here, I anticipate that national governments may take a back seat to businesses, subnational governments, labour unions, and educational and non-profit institutions in driving progress, especially in places hit by political fragmentation and a backlash against the political establishment.

Such fragmentation is likely to intensify. Automation is set to sustain, and even accelerate, change on the demand side of labour markets, in areas ranging from manufacturing and logistics to medicine and law, while supply-side responses will be much slower. As a result, even if workers gain stronger support during structural transitions (in the form of income support and retraining options), labour-market mismatches are likely to grow, sharpening inequality and contributing to further political and social polarisation.

Nonetheless, there are reasons to be cautiously optimistic. For starters, there remains a broad consensus across the developed and emerging economies on the desirability of maintaining a relatively open global economy.

The notable exception is the US, though it is unclear at this point whether President Donald Trump's administration actually intends to retreat from international co-operation, or is merely positioning itself to renegotiate terms that are more favourable to the US. What does seem clear, at least for now, is that the US cannot be counted on to serve as a principal

sponsor and architect of the evolving rules-based global system for fairly managing interdependence.

The situation is similar with regard to mitigating climate change. The US is now the only country that is not committed to the Paris climate agreement, which has held despite the Trump administration's withdrawal. Even within the US, cities, states, and businesses, as well as a host of civil-society organisations, have signalled a credible commitment to fulfilling America's climate obligations, with or without the federal government.

Still, the world has a long way to go, as its dependence on coal remains high. The Financial Times reports that peak demand for coal in India will come in about ten years, with modest growth between now and then. While there is upside potential in this scenario, depending on more rapid cost reductions in green energy, the world is still years away from negative growth in carbon dioxide emissions.

All of this suggests that the global economy will confront serious challenges in the months and years ahead. And looming in the background is a mountain of debt that makes markets nervous and increases the system's vulnerability to destabilising shocks. Yet the baseline scenario in the short run seems to be one of continuity. Economic power and influence will continue to shift from west to east, without any sudden change in the pattern of job, income, political, and social polarisation, primarily in the developed countries, and with no obvious convulsions on the horizon. – Project Syndicate

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Erdogan holds all the cards in the Jamal Khashoggi mystery



(*CNN*) It was trailed as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's great reveal. Finally, after weeks of murky leaks to journalists, Turkey clearly wanted to give the impression that it was going to provide evidence that tied Saudi's Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

But his address to Turkey's parliament on Tuesday will have pleased US President Trump as much as it will have the Saudis: it contained no smoking gun directly implicating his Middle East ally.

Erdogan, however, did kick enough dirt and, along with copious leaks over recent weeks from his officials, leaves a Damoclean sword dangling over both Trump and bin Salman.

Erdogan says Khashoggi was victim of 'ferocious' pre-planned murder

There is no doubt that US CIA chief Gina Haspel, who recently arrived in Turkey, will be hoovering up any more scraps she

can get out of Erdogan's tight grip – specifically on the much talked-about recording of Khashoggi's "ferocious murder," of which Erdogan made no mention.

He did, however, drop some new claims that hadn't yet been drip-fed to journalists: that a private jet flew in the day before Khashoggi's killing with three Saudis aboard; that Saudis at the consulate removed security cameras before Khashoggi arrived; and that a team of consular staff did reconnaissance on a forest on the outskirts of Istanbul and at Yalova, a city about a 55-mile (90-kilometer) drive south of Istanbul.

He also specifically pushed back on Saudi claims of an accidental killing of Khashoggi, saying: "We have significant signs that this was not something spontaneous, that it was planned," adding that "In light of the known facts, there are certain questions that people are asking."

His speech amounted to many more questions, for which Erdogan demanded answers:

"Why did these 15 people, all of whom had qualifications related to the incident, gather in Istanbul on the day of the murder? We want an answer to that question. On whose orders did these people come there? We want an answer. Why was it only possible to access the consulate building days later, and not immediately? We want an answer."

He appealed to King Salman of Saudi Arabia – whose grip on power and whose own faculties have been an open question in western capitals of late – to help answer a number of questions – top among them, the whereabouts of Khashoggi's body.

He also demanded that Saudi Arabia explain why it had 15 top officials fly in and out of Turkey on chartered jets, all congregating at the consulate in the hours before Khashoggi's arrival, and dispersing back to Saudi soon after.

Saudi Aramco CEO on Khashoggi's death 01:27

His conclusion? That Khashoggi's "ferocious murder" could not have happened without planning and approval from the highest levels, which Saudi still denies.

"Trying to blame a few members of the security and intelligence staff for such an incident will satisfy neither us, nor the international community. The collective conscience of humanity will deem it satisfactory only when everyone who

is responsible, from the person who gave the order to those who executed it, is called to answer.”

So, not quite the “nothing will remain hidden” speech that was promised by his party officials, but also not entirely a damp squib.

However, for the 20 minutes it took him to set out his narrative in contradiction to the Saudi explanation, Erdogan had the world’s attention.

And he used it to maximum effect, demanding Turkish jurisdiction over the investigation – openly challenging the Saudi justice minister, who over the weekend claimed the case as theirs to investigate.

Erdogan said: “I am calling on the King of Saudi Arabia, and the highest level of the Saudi administration. The incident has occurred in Istanbul. Therefore, I propose that this team of 15+3 people, 18 people in total, who have been arrested, should be tried in Istanbul. The decision will be theirs. But this is my proposition.”

Khashoggi’s death taking place on his doorstep has handed Erdogan the single largest piece of leverage he is ever likely to have over his regional nemesis, the Saudi Crown Prince.

Whereabouts of Khashoggi’s body still unknown 02:20

Many in Turkey believe that the Crown Prince’s bill is finally coming due. Erdogan seems to be gambling that western leaders agree.

Bin Salman’s hard-line approach to leadership has graduated from kidnapping a Prime Minister to locking up members of his own family to attempting to blow up his relationship with Canada.

Now, if Erdogan’s assertions are correct, bin Salman’s coup de grâce could be complicity in the murder of a journalist.

If no one in Riyadh will tell the emperor he has no clothes, Erdogan appears to be trying to build an international consensus so the young Crown Prince gets the message.

In retrospect, it seems unconscionable he could have been allowed to get this far. Stranger that it could take a figure like Erdogan to take him down over the issue of human rights and freedom of speech.

Erdogan’s jails hold many journalists critical of him and he has amassed the powers of his once semi-democratic state in his own authoritarian hand. He is hardly a paragon of virtue.

But bin Salman represents an enduring if not existential threat to his state.

At 33, bin Salman is set to become King and a regional power broker for decades. Erdogan's political Islam is one of the biggest threats to his royal rule.

In the end, Erdogan's speech was more a reveal of his own strategy than lurid details and evidence of the murder and responsibility itself.

Right now, Erdogan simply didn't need to reveal his full hand, because the three most important people listening today will have heard the message loud and clear.

King Salman, Trump and the Crown Prince will know exactly what Erdogan intends to do next: drip incriminating information until he gets what he wants – the trial of 18 senior Saudis on his turf, bin Salman brought to heel and who knows what else from President Trump.

Renaud Girard: «Derrière l'affaire Khashoggi, le bras de fer Arabie-Turquie»



FIGAROVOX/CHRONIQUE – Il y a, entre le néo-ottomanisme du

président Erdogan et le wahhabisme modernisé du prince héritier Mohammed Ben Salman, une rivalité pour la domination du monde sunnite, la grande majorité des musulmans.

Après avoir menti pendant trois semaines au monde entier, le royaume d'Arabie saoudite a enfin reconnu qu'il avait bien assassiné son sujet Jamal Khashoggi, journaliste bien connu dans le petit milieu des observateurs du Moyen-Orient. Ce meurtre – dont on ne connaît pas encore toutes les circonstances – s'est déroulé le 2 octobre 2018, dans l'enceinte du consulat saoudien à Istanbul. Khashoggi, 59 ans, petit-fils du médecin d'Ibn Séoud et éditorialiste épisodique au Washington Post, connu pour ses positions critiques envers la politique du prince héritier de son pays (Mohammed Ben Salman, dit MBS), avait pris un rendez-vous de type administratif au consulat. Il devait y retirer un certificat de divorce, en vue d'un mariage. Le même jour, le royaume avait envoyé à Istanbul, sur deux avions privés, une escouade de quinze «spécialistes» des services de renseignement. En tuant Khashoggi, ils auraient agi de leur seul chef, essaient aujourd'hui de faire croire les autorités saoudiennes, sans parvenir à convaincre. Le président turc Erdogan a promis qu'il prononcerait un grand discours ce mardi 23 octobre 2018, où il détaillerait toute la vérité découverte par ses services de renseignement.

Au cours des trois semaines écoulées, le gouvernement turc a fait subir à la monarchie saoudienne une sorte de supplice persan. Sans la dénoncer officiellement, il a distillé sous le manteau à la presse turque de plus en plus de détails, de plus en plus horribles, sur les circonstances de cet assassinat. Au point que le prince héritier, MBS, a désormais gagné le surnom de Mohammed Bone Saw (scie à os) dans les milieux journalistiques américains. Ankara a compris que cette affaire allait capturer l'imagination des opinions publiques du monde entier et l'a immédiatement exploitée avec habileté.

Le président turc Erdogan est un frère musulman qui n'a que

mépris pour les monarchies dynastiques...

Dans le jeu triangulaire des trois puissances les plus concernées par Khashoggi, l'Arabie saoudite, la Turquie et les États-Unis (dont le journaliste détenait une carte de résident), c'est la Turquie qui a, pour le moment, le mieux joué. Elle s'est rapprochée des États-Unis en libérant le pasteur Andrew Brunson, injustement poursuivi pour espionnage (lire notre chronique du mardi 14 août 2018) ; elle a joué les vierges effarouchées dès la disparition du dissident saoudien ; elle a affaibli le royaume en le laissant s'enfermer dans ses mensonges. L'Arabie saoudite est la première responsable du naufrage de sa politique de relations publiques (pour laquelle elle dépense quelque 900 millions de dollars par an). Mais les Turcs n'ont à aucun moment songer à lui lancer une bouée...

C'est qu'il y a, entre le néo-ottomanisme du président Erdogan et le wahhabisme modernisé du prince héritier MBS, une rivalité pour la domination du monde sunnite – la grande majorité des musulmans, ceux-ci étant fidèles à la tradition (sunna) des compagnons du Prophète, par opposition à la faction (chia) des partisans de son gendre Ali, que l'on appelle chiites. En termes démographiques, l'Arabie saoudite (33 millions d'habitants) est nettement distancée par la Turquie (80 millions). Mais en termes économiques, le PIB de la première (684 milliards de dollars) n'est pas très loin de celui de la seconde (851 milliards). Et si se poursuit la hausse des cours du pétrole, l'Arabie saoudite va à nouveau regorger de capitaux disponibles, ce qui ne sera pas le cas de la Turquie, fortement endettée. En termes symboliques, la monarchie wahhabite a l'avantage de pouvoir se proclamer la gardienne des deux plus saintes mosquées de l'islam (La Mecque et Médine). Mais elle est pénalisée par son alliance non avouée avec Israël, alors que la Turquie se présente, depuis 2010, comme la grande défenderesse de la cause palestinienne.

L'Arabie saoudite et la Turquie professent des idéologies très différentes. Le wahhabisme (du nom d'un prédicateur puritain qui fit alliance avec la tribu Saoud au XVIIIe siècle) prône socialement l'imitation du comportement des «pieux ancêtres», ces bédouins du VIIe siècle. Politiquement, il ordonne la soumission aux princes légitimes. À l'opposé, le président turc Erdogan est un frère musulman qui n'a que mépris pour les monarchies dynastiques, qu'il juge intrinsèquement corrompues, et qui croit aux vertus de l'expression politique des fidèles.

Géopolitiquement, l'Arabie saoudite est l'alliée des Émirats et de l'Égypte. Mais, en 2017, la Turquie a pris sous sa protection le riche émirat du Qatar, qui courait le risque d'être avalé par ses voisins saoudien et émirati. Les Saoudiens prient tous les jours pour la destruction de l'Iran chiite, alors que les Turcs entretiennent de cordiales relations avec la Perse depuis près de 400 ans.

L'affaire Khashoggi a révélé chez les musulmans l'acuité d'une rivalité intrasunnite qui, jusque-là, était cachée par l'ancestrale opposition sunnites-chiites.