

Focus on EU's 2019-2024 strategic agenda



As the European Parliament election approaches, Europe is abuzz with speculation over who will lead the main European Union institutions for the next five years. Among the positions up for grabs are those currently held by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker; European Council President Donald Tusk; Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; and European Central Bank President Mario Draghi. Personnel issues are hardly trivial. In politics, personality matters, and it has often played a pivotal role in determining the EU's trajectory. Still, the leadership name game should not be the main focus.

Far more important is the debate over the EU's 2019-2024 strategic agenda. After an informal summit in Sibiu, Romania, earlier this month, European leaders will return to this issue in earnest later in June. And for all of the attention paid to the EU's institutions, it is EU heads of state who will craft the bloc's agenda. In other words, member-state governments, operating through the European Council, will be the actors to watch after the election results are in. When the European Economic Community, the precursor to the EU, was established in 1957, its primary objective was to secure the peace between France and Germany, starting with a customs union for industrial goods (for the Germans) and a common agricultural policy (for the French). This arrangement anchored the

European agenda for decades.

Then, when the Soviet Union and its empire collapsed, countries that had been trapped behind the Iron Curtain wanted to “return to Europe.” In the years since, the EU has undergone a massive expansion to include them. Its goal has been twofold: to aid the newer member states in their post-communist economic and political development, and to maintain continental peace and stability by bringing Central and Eastern Europe into the fold of EU institutions. The immediate post-Cold War period was a time of self-confidence and optimism for the EU. Gradually, its strategic mission expanded beyond merely keeping the peace, to projecting the European model of shared sovereignty and integration abroad. The EU model, it was said, would lead to more stable governance for the entire world. Over the past decade, however, the EU’s effort to project its model outward has collapsed. Following the 2008 financial crash, the euro crisis, and recurrent migration imbroglios, the EU has turned inward. At the same time, the EU’s immediate neighbourhood has transformed from a circle of potential friends and partners into a ring of fire. Now, rather than trying to export stability, Europe’s strategic priority is to protect itself from the wider world. In trying to breathe new life into the EU after years of inward-looking crisis management, French President Emmanuel Macron has pushed for “a Europe that protects.” Following Macron’s call to arms, published by Project Syndicate this March, the EU leadership in Brussels has taken up that mantra and bundled various initiatives under the theme of protecting Europe in an age of global tumult. Such protection is undoubtedly necessary. Migration pressures, the constant threat of terrorism, and escalating economic disputes all demand a stronger policy response.

And while addressing some of these issues has proved controversial and difficult, the larger protection agenda is being carried out. Yet, looking ahead, it is clear that the

current measures won't be enough. The EU finds itself in a world dominated by great-power rivalries, Chinese assertiveness, and revisionist Russian belligerence. Worse, in confronting these threats, it can no longer count on the United States as an unconditional friend and ally. The EU now must choose between securing its own place on the global stage and becoming a playground for other powers. This is a strategic decision of the first order – all other policy choices will follow from it. If Europe ignores or checks out of the dramas roiling the world from Amritsar in India to Agadir in Morocco, it will fail to ensure peace in its neighbourhood and betray its promise to its citizens to protect them from external danger. For the EU to uphold its original mission – peace and stability at home – it must become a global player.

The choice, then, is clear. Europe's strategic mission in the coming years must be to secure its position on the world stage, and all matters of policy and personnel should be settled in a way that advances that objective. Obviously, a strong European Council president, working closely with a strong high representative, will be essential. Both will need to mobilise the resources and talents of all EU member states to prevent the EU's constituent parts from being pulled in different directions by global forces. If the EU's member states embrace this mission, Europe will be positioned to act as a global player for years to come. Otherwise, they – and the EU as a whole – will find themselves on a merry-go-round over which they have no control. – Project Syndicate zCarl Bildt is a former prime minister and foreign minister of Sweden.

Salvini Vows to Change EU Tax Rules as Aide Turns Fire on PM



Italian Deputy Premier Matteo Salvini vowed to change European Union rules in order to push through his promise of a 15% flat tax for everyone, as his top aide turned against Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

Salvini and his rightist League kicked off the week by opening fire on several fronts ahead of the European Parliament vote May 26, as tensions within the populist government escalated over immigration and other issues.

Salvini pledged at a pan-European rally of 12 nationalist parties in his hometown Milan on Saturday to push through the flat tax, a measure likely to raise concerns both in Brussels and among investors on how the government will draft the 2020

budget against the backdrop of a sluggish economy.

“The only way to create jobs is to reduce taxes, so we need to change some European rules and some limits imposed by Brussels,” Salvini told La7 television on Monday.

Changing deficit and debt caps would mean altering EU treaties, which in turn requires unanimity between member states and possibly referendums in some countries. Salvini has nonetheless continued to call those limits into question.

The deputy premier stayed on topic throughout the day on Monday, saying in a video interview on Facebook that tax cuts should initially be financed with a higher deficit, and that rules imposed by Europe are flawed.

Quarreling between the League and coalition partner the Five Star Movement, including over Salvini’s threat last week to challenge the EU limits, has spooked financial markets, widening the yield spread between Italian and German government bonds last week.

Now, Giancarlo Giorgetti, who’s also cabinet secretary, is adding fuel to the fire, voicing long-running frustration among League lieutenants about Five Star, which picked Conte a year ago.

“Conte is no longer impartial,” Giorgetti told newspaper La Stampa. The premier tries to act as a mediator between the League and Five Star but “when the clash becomes tough and he has to take a side, he goes for the stand of those who put him forward,” Giorgetti said. “The situation cannot last for ever.”

Questioning the premier’s neutrality “is not a serious allegation, it’s a very serious one,” Conte said later Monday in comments to reporters. The premier also acknowledged that clashes between the two parties in the coalition are becoming increasingly heated.

Conte, a former law professor, was plucked from obscurity by

Salvini and fellow Deputy Premier Luigi Di Maio of Five Star last year. While never a Five Star member himself, Conte was loosely affiliated with the movement in the past and Di Maio once named him as a possible candidate to head the Public Administration Ministry.

Salvini backed Giorgetti's remarks. "If everyone keeps their word and keeps their promises, we keep going for five years," Salvini said in the La7 interview. "The problem is the 'no's' on autonomy, the flat tax, unblocking construction projects."

Unprecedented Tensions

Both Salvini and Di Maio have repeatedly insisted the government won't collapse despite unprecedented tensions before the European elections. The partners have squabbled about everything from security and immigration to more powers for regions in the League's northern stronghold.

Senior officials in both the League and Five Star have said the infighting is mainly due to the election campaign, although uncertainty remains on the coalition's future.

Salvini, who has campaigned on an "Italy First" platform, also took a swipe at Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei Technologies Co. "China is surely not a democracy," he said on La7, adding that "sensitive data, what there is on our phones, the medical data of Italians, of our current accounts, must be Italian."

The impact of the Trump administration's threats to choke Huawei reverberated across the global supply chain on Monday, hitting some of the biggest component-makers. Alphabet Inc.'s Google cut off the supply of hardware and some software services to Huawei, a person familiar with the matter said.

Salvini, who's also interior minister and has insisted Italian ports remain closed to humanitarian ships carrying rescued migrants, protested on La7 Sunday night as he watched migrants disembark at a Sicilian port.

“Someone must have given the order,” Salvini said, as Five Star officials insisted no minister of that party had granted access to the ports. “That person has to account for his action.”

Salvini said he’ll propose giving his ministry powers over migrant vessels in territorial waters at a cabinet meeting he said will take place later Monday. Conte’s office said no time has been set for the meeting.

– *With assistance by Nikos Chrysoloras, Dan Liefgreen, and Marco Bertacche*

(Updates with Salvini on Facebook in sixth paragraph.)

Opec signals intention to keep limits on oil supply all year amid Russia doubts



Bloomberg Moscow/London

Key producers in Opec signalled their intention to keep oil supplies constrained for the rest of the year, while pledging to prevent any genuine shortages.

It was less clear how far Russia, their main partner in the wider Opec+ producers' coalition, shared that view. While most nations at a meeting in Saudi Arabia on Sunday supported extending production cuts to the end of 2019, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak talked about potentially relaxing the curbs and wanted to wait and see what happens in the next month.

"We need to stay the course, and do that for the weeks and months to come," Saudi Energy Minister Khalid al-Falih told reporters after the meeting in Jeddah.

The contrasting messages underscore the uncertainty in the global market. If ministers don't agree to an extension next month, the production cuts that ended the worst oil-industry downturn in a generation will expire. Yet their decision is clouded by the impact of US sanctions on Iran and the risk to demand from President Donald Trump's trade war with China.

In a market where the preponderance of risks are on the supply side – with Venezuela and Libya also facing disruptions – what Saudi Arabia chooses to do with its ample spare production capacity may be a crucial factor in the coming months.

On Sunday, al-Falih gave a strong indication that prices were the priority and he wasn't about to open the taps.

Benchmark Brent crude rose as much as 1.7% yesterday, and traded up 0.5% at \$72.58 a barrel as of 10.40am in London.

Continuing the Opec+ accord into the second half wouldn't rule out a production increase. Saudi Arabia has been cutting far deeper than required under the deal and could boost output by about 500,000 barrels a day – equivalent to almost half Iran's exports – without breaching its limit.

Yet al-Falih said production in May and June will be held at the current level of 9.8mn barrels a day. Regardless of what Opec+ decides next month, output in July won't exceed the

kingdom's limit in the deal of 10.3mn barrels a day, he said. The meeting of the Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee, which oversees the deal between the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies, was generally supportive of an extension, and nobody rejected the idea, Nigerian Oil Minister Emmanuel Ibe Kachikwu said in an interview.

Even so, the committee didn't make a formal recommendation to prolong the supply curbs, concluding instead that further monitoring of the market was necessary, with a focus on managing inventories and keeping supply and demand in balance. The fate of the group's production cuts, which amounted to about 2% of global supply last month, will be decided on June 25 to 26 in Vienna, just days before they expire. That's a volatile situation for the oil market, giving traders very little time to adjust if there's an unexpected shift in policy.

Russia's Novak affirmed his commitment to the historic alliance, saying the production cuts have "proved very efficient." But before and after the meeting he also spoke of the possibility of relaxing the cuts. "We need to promptly react to the situation now and potential developments in the second half," Novak said before the meeting. "If the demand grows, if a deficit is there, we are ready to consider a relaxation of the current parameters, partial output recovery."

Extending the deal is also on the table, and Russia would comply with any agreed output limit in the second half of 2019, Novak said.

Climate-action delay to cost

investors more than \$1tn in 15 years



Delays in tackling climate change could cost companies about \$1.2tn worldwide during the next 15 years, according to the UN. That's the preliminary analysis of a UN Environment Finance Initiative project that brought together 20 global fund managers to measure the impact of climate change on 30,000 of the largest listed companies. The group has created a guide for investors to assess how their holdings would respond to different levels of global warming and policy making. "Investors have a central role to play in moving the world to a low-carbon future," said Maurice Tulloch, chief executive officer of Aviva Plc, one of the participants in the project. "This collaboration shows how we can all take better decisions, for our customers and for the environment." Extreme weather events, including floods, tropical cyclones, and extreme hot and cold days are already hitting business operations. Should governments install tougher policy in the push for cleaner technology, emission-intensive companies will increasingly struggle to compete. As well as Aviva, the investor group included companies such as Manulife Asset Management, M&G Prudential Ltd and DNB Asset Management

AS. The work was guided by advisory and modelling firms Carbon Delta AG and Vivid Economics Ltd. Investors are playing an increased role to protect financial stability against climate change. The research work will enable them to better understand climate-related risks and opportunities, in line with the recommendations of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures, a part of the Financial Stability Board global regulator, the UN said. The task force is chaired by Michael Bloomberg, the majority owner of Bloomberg LP. To cut investor risks, governments probably need to put in place consistently rising carbon taxes or markets that will spur a shift to cleaner technology, Christopher Hope, a policy modelling expert at the University of Cambridge, told funds managers gathered in London on Friday.

Hungary will have to buy Russian natural gas if Exxon waits on offshore project, says minister



HOUSTON (Reuters) – Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said on Wednesday his country would again turn to Russia for natural gas supplies if Exxon Mobil Corp has not decided by September whether to invest in a massive Black Sea offshore project.

Romania's Black Sea reserves pose a potential challenge to Russian Gazprom's dominant role supplying Central and Eastern Europe, according to consultancy Deloitte. Tapping those fields could diversify the region's gas supplies and bring the Romanian government revenue of \$26 billion by 2040.

"Exxon Mobil can be the game changer in the energy supply of Europe. But they should finally make their final investment decision," Szijjarto told Reuters during an interview in Houston where he was opening a consulate office.

"If they don't make that decision until September, I will have to make another long-term agreement with the Russians."

Exxon and Austrian energy group OMV's Romanian subsidiary, OMV Petrom SA, have put on hold a decision on tapping the natural

gas field pending legal framework revisions. The field has been estimated to hold 1.5 trillion to 3 trillion cubic feet (42 billion to 84 billion cubic meters) of natural gas.

Exxon is weighing several factors while deciding whether to invest in the Neptun Deep project in Romania, spokeswoman Julie King said on Wednesday.

A decision would require “competitive and stable fiscal terms, a liberalized Romanian gas market that enables free trade, and sufficient interconnectivity with neighboring free and liquid markets, in each case, for the duration of our concession agreement,” King said.

Hungary’s landlocked location in Central Europe puts it at a disadvantage in getting access to needed imports of natural gas, which is used by 85 percent of the households in the country, Szijjarto said.

“The question of whether we will be able to diversify gas resources depends on four allies of ours: Croatia, Romania, the United States and Austria,” he said. “It’s a strange situation where we are encouraged by our friends and allies to diversify, but basically it’s up to them.”

Development of a liquified natural gas (LNG) terminal on the Croatian island of Krk, would help it diversify from the current, east-to-west logistics system established during the Cold War when the Soviet Union dominated Eastern and Central Europe, Szijjarto said.

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A carbon dividend is better than carbon tax



By Mark Paul And Anthony Underwood/Sarasota

Climate change is the world's most urgent problem, and in the United States, the left, at least, is taking it seriously. Earlier this year, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Senator Edward Markey of Massachusetts, both Democrats, introduced a Green New Deal (GND) resolution, which offers a blueprint for decarbonising the US economy. But while a growing number of Democratic presidential contenders have endorsed their proposal, centrist Democrats and Republicans continue to cling to a different climate-policy approach. The key centrist proposal, in keeping with the prevailing neoliberal dispensation, is a carbon tax. The idea is simple: if you tax fossil fuels where they enter the economy – be it at a wellhead, mine, or port – you can fully capture the social cost of pollution. In economic parlance, this is known as a Pigovian tax, because it is meant to correct an undesirable outcome in the market, or what the British economist Arthur Pigou defined as a negative externality – in

this case, the greenhouse-gas emissions that are responsible for global warming.

As a response to climate change, a carbon tax is immensely popular among economists from across the political spectrum, and it does have an important role to play. But it is far from sufficient. Rapidly decarbonising the economy in a way that is economically equitable and politically feasible will require a comprehensive package on the order of the GND. That means combining some market-based policies with large-scale private- and public-sector investments and carefully crafted environmental regulations.

Even in this case, including a standard carbon tax involves certain risks. Just ask French President Emmanuel Macron, whose country has been roiled by months of demonstrations that were initially launched in response to a new tax on diesel fuel. The lesson from the weekly “yellow vests” protests is clear: unless environmental policies account for today’s high levels of inequality, voters will reject them.

Nonetheless, as progressives push for more green investment, they will look to the carbon tax as a source of revenue. After all, depending on the size, it could raise almost a trillion dollars per year. But rather than a straightforward levy, they should consider implementing a carbon dividend, whereby carbon would be taxed, but the proceeds would be returned to the people in equal shares. Yes, this would preclude one option for funding the GND; but it would ensure that the transition to a carbon-free economy remains on track, by protecting the incomes of low- and middle-class households.

A common objection to a carbon dividend is that it would defeat the original purpose of a carbon price, which is to encourage people to reduce emissions. But this isn’t true. To see why, suppose you are a low-income American, currently spending \$75 per month on gas. Assuming that your driving behaviour does not change, a carbon tax of \$230 per ton – the level needed just to put us on a path toward limiting global warming to 2.5° C above pre-industrial levels – would raise your monthly fuel expenditure by \$59, to \$134, or 79%. In this

case, you unquestionably will feel poorer. This is what economists call an "income effect."

Now imagine that a carbon dividend is in place: you would receive a monthly payment of \$187, more than offsetting the price increase, and leaving you feeling richer. But wouldn't this also leave you with a greater incentive to use gasoline? Economic theory suggests not.

Just because the price of gas increases does not mean that everything else in the economy will follow suit. Rather, goods and services that produce a lot of carbon dioxide emissions will become relatively more expensive than those that do not. Hence, you would have a choice between using the dividend to drive more and using it to increase your consumption of other things, from dinners with friends to new running shoes. Those social gatherings and shoes are your incentive to use less carbon. This is what economists call the "substitution effect."

In this way, a carbon dividend would gradually nudge people, large businesses, and the government away from carbon-intensive consumption and toward activities and investments that reduce their emissions. Equally important, a carbon dividend would protect the poor. A straightforward carbon tax is inherently regressive, because it imposes the same cost on the poor as it does on the rich. But a carbon dividend inverts this effect, because every dollar that is returned will be worth more to a low-income household than it will be to a wealthy one.

Moreover, it is the rich who fly all over the world, heat and cool enormous homes, and drive inefficient sports cars. Because they lead far more carbon-intensive lifestyles than everyone else, they would contribute far more per capita to the carbon dividend. More to the point, they would pay in much more than they get back, while the poorest 60% of Americans would get back more than they put in.

In short, a carbon dividend would distribute money from predominantly wealthy high polluters to predominantly low- and middle-income low polluters, all while reducing CO₂ emissions.

On its own, it would represent a smart step in the right direction – one that wouldn't invite a "yellow vest" reaction. But don't let anyone tell you it's a silver bullet. When it comes to climate change, there isn't one. – Project Syndicate

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<https://www.gulf-times.com/story/631897/A-carbon-dividend-is-better-than-carbon-tax>

Argentina is about to export first LNG cargo



Bloomberg/Singapore

Argentina is offering its first-ever liquefied natural gas cargo, putting the nation on the verge of becoming a regular exporter of the fuel.

YPF SA, the state-run oil and gas producer, is seeking to sell a partial cargo from the Tango floating liquefaction unit, or FLNG, at Bahia Blanca, according to traders with knowledge of the matter. The company is currently negotiating the sale of the 30,000-cubic-metre shipment on a free-on-board basis for loading this summer, said the traders, who asked not to be identified as the information isn't public.

A YPF spokesman declined to comment on the cargo.

The cargo – while relatively small compared with standard shipments – will mark Argentina's transition from one of Latin America's biggest LNG importers into an exporter. That's being driven by growing gas production from the Vaca Muerta shale play. Another factor is the country's recession, which is hurting domestic demand. It's still an importer, however: In March, it bought nine LNG cargoes in a tender.

Argentina is following the path of other nations, which recently resumed exports after domestic output surged.

Last year, YPF signed a 10-year contract with Belgium's Exmar NV to deploy an FLNG plant to produce and export the fuel. The Tango FLNG docked at the port of Bahia Blanca in February.

Energy Secretary Gustavo Lopetegui said in April that YPF would ship its first cargo as soon as August. The plant will produce as many as eight cargoes per year from the Vaca Muerta at the Neuquen Basin, Exmar said last year.

<https://www.gulf-times.com/story/631920/Argentina-is-about-to-export-first-LNG-cargo>

BP's investors unite over fears it's 'falling behind' on climate



When BP Plc meets with shareholders next week, it'll be facing one of the clearest signals yet that the fossil-fuel business is facing an adapt-or-die reckoning.

A resolution at the company's annual general meeting on May 21 will ask BP to prove in a series of reports how individual capital investments, and its overall business strategy, are aligned with the goals of the Paris climate accord. The proposal already has the backing of almost a tenth of the company's shareholders, including seven of the oil major's 20 largest stockholders, such as Legal & General Investment Management Ltd., and UBS Asset Management.

The resolution is intended to make BP address climate change sooner and is one of many examples of investors seeking to pressure companies. Shareholders have forced the issue now because at least four years of talks on the issue with management were "moving slowly," said the director of

stewardship at Hermes EOS, who took the lead on speaking to BP.

“We felt the company was falling behind other competitors in terms of its ambitions,” Bruce Duguid, at Hermes, said in an interview. Right now “there’s not a clear demonstration that the company’s strategy is consistent with the goals of the Paris agreement.”

BP said earlier this year it supports the resolution and asked all shareholders to vote for it at the meeting. If a majority do, it will be legally binding.

The company said it will begin including the information requested in its 2019 annual report, which will be released in about a year. It should show which projects are high-cost or most polluting, the riskiest sorts of investment in a world trying to wean itself off carbon.

Talks with BP became especially pointed last year as competitor Royal Dutch Shell Plc defined its long-term ambitions around climate change, which is to halve its net carbon footprint by 2050 and ultimately pivot to cleaner fuels.

BP in contrast has been focused on paying more than \$60 billion in fines and legal costs associated with spilling millions of barrels of crude into the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. The company has now returned to sound financial footing and plans to rapidly expand its oil and gas output to reach near parity with its larger peers.

“The fact that the company has now come through the Gulf of Mexico litigation and is now back to a growth strategy, is a key cause of the concern,” Duguid said.

While BP Chief Executive Officer Bob Dudley has spoken about his support for climate change action, he has taken aim at some measures the company has been asked to adopt. He said detailed disclosures can be fodder for class action lawyers

which look to profit from minor and unpreventable inconsistencies.

The company has instead supported efforts such as the Oil and Gas Climate Initiative, which invests in low-carbon technologies. It has also bought stakes in solar and other renewable energy companies and it purchased an electric car-charging company last year.

Duguid said BP still has fallen behind its competitors in defining how it will “transition” as the world cuts carbon from the energy system. He said he drafted the resolution in the autumn, with other investors, without knowing whether BP would support it. Ultimately 58 investors signed on as co-filers.

The engagement with BP was also aided by an 18-month old coalition of investors called Climate Action 100+. The group, which oversees about \$33 trillion in assets, is asking more than 150 of the largest corporate greenhouse gas emitters to align their business strategy with the Paris accord. Climate Action 100+ has already persuaded Shell to adapt short-term climate targets and convinced Glencore Plc to cut coal production.

“There’s 161 companies on the focus list, so around the world we’ve got groups of investors engaging with each one of those,” said Stephanie Pfeifer, head of the Climate Action 100+ group’s European arm. “There’s plenty of time to have more dialogue, and sort of ratchet up the asks, as well.”

First Annual Eastern

Mediterranean Leadership Summit

Energy



Interest in the Eastern Mediterranean has increased during the last years with the discovery of major gas fields such as Tamar, Leviathan and the giant Zohr field in Egypt. These have opened up major opportunities for new discoveries, but also for oil and gas investments in the region.

The **First Eastern Mediterranean Energy Leadership Summit** will be held at the **Divani Apollon Palace & Thalasso** in Athens, Greece, from **June 24 -25, 2019**. The event is organized by the Transatlantic Leadership Network, the University of Piraeus – MSc in Energy: Strategy, Law & Economics of the Department of International & European Studies, and SGT S.A.

Held at the Ministerial level, the Summit will gather together senior government officials and business executives from the energy market to identify crucial opportunities and challenges for continued commercial and geopolitical cooperation. Invited countries include the United States, members of the Three Seas Initiative, and countries surrounding the Eastern Mediterranean Region. During the conference diverse thoughts, ideas and best practices will be presented on how Eastern Mediterranean countries can best take advantage of their geographical positions and exploit available energy resources to secure a more reliable, self-sufficient and environmental

sustainable energy supply.

Topics of discussion:

- The Future of Oil & Gas in the Eastern Mediterranean: Alternative Scenarios and Policy Perspectives
- Security Dimensions of Transatlantic Energy Cooperation: The Effects on the Eastern Mediterranean
- Opportunities for Energy Cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean: Project View
- Building a Framework for Regional Energy Cooperation and Integration
- Energy Developments in South East Europe. The Challenge for the Region
- Market Trends: Predicting Winners and Losers
- Regional Electricity Market Dynamics
- Investment Outlook: Required Financial Resources and Remaining Challenges
- Removing Barriers and Exploiting Opportunities

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Prices stable amid lack of

end-user buying



LONDON (Reuters) – Liquefied natural gas (LNG) prices in Asia held largely steady this week, taking a breather after recovering from a significant dip in March.

LNG for delivery in northeast Asia in June is estimated at \$5.60 per million British thermal units (mmBtu), the same level as last week.

The July price is seen at a slight contango – a market structure in which prompt prices are below later-dated prices – and is estimated at \$5.65 mmBtu.

Demand kept coming from trading and portfolio companies who are optimizing their positions in the Far East. Deals for June cargoes were done between \$5.50-5.60 in the Platts market on close (MOC) window this week.

Several companies are in talks to optimize their July positions as well, an LNG trader said.

One is the trading arm of Russian producer Novatek, which is looking to buy a cargo in the Pacific basin to cover a July delivery position in Asia, two market sources said.

A lack of end-user demand kept prices from rising however, with some buyers offering to sell cargoes. China's PetroChina was offering a cargo in the Platts MOC window for late June delivery.

A spot cargo offered from Malaysia's Bintulu for early June loading likely didn't find a buyer, a shipping market source said.

In Europe, Spain's delivery prices are increasing on the back of higher gas demand in the country, two trade sources said.

Offers rose to above the level of the Dutch gas hub benchmark price as sellers see Spain having to compete for cargoes with other markets, one of the sources said.

There were several spot cargo offers in Europe. Novatek is selling a late May delivery cargo to northwest Europe from the Yamal plant, two sources said.

PetroChina, another offtaker from Yamal, has offered three cargoes for June delivery to Europe, one industry source said.

Front-month gas prices in the Netherlands and Britain fell by around 20 cents to around \$4.63 and \$4.24 per mmBtu respectively.

There were two diversions of cargoes from Europe to Mexico in the past week, indicating more attractive prices in the recent tenders of Mexican utility CFE compared to Europe.