Natural gas drops below $2 as US shale blitz overwhelms demand

Natural gas futures sank below $2 per million British thermal units for the first time since 2016 as an onslaught of US supply from shale basins overwhelmed demand for the heating and power-plant fuel. Aside from a few brief cold snaps, the weather hasn't been frigid enough to keep heaters on full blast and sustain a rally in gas prices. Though stockpiles ended last winter more than 30% below normal for this time of year, record production quickly replenished gas in underground storage. Since the shale boom began more than a decade ago, producers have been unable to shake off the supply glut that's kept prices in the doldrums even as new pipelines and exports plants send unprecedented amounts of gas to Mexico and overseas. While drillers have been remarkably successful in ramping up output in recent years, their track record of doing so profitably has been mixed at best. "Prices have hinted at a break below $2 multiple times throughout the past year and it have fought hard to resist a complete breakdown," said Daniel Myers, an analyst at Gelber & Associates in Houston. But the market finally caved as "Mother Nature pulls the rug out from under prices one more time." The latest weather models show above-nor- mal temperatures across much of the East later in January, a sharp shift from earlier predictions for cooler conditions. That suggests a loss in demand for the heating fuel that’s “the biggest so far this entire winter season,” according to Commodity Weather Group LLC. Natural gas futures for next-month delivery fell as low as $1.998 per million Btu just before the end of trading Friday in New York, but settled at $2.003. Futures fell 26% in 2019, making gas one of the year’s worst-performing commodities. Prices last dropped below $2 in May 2016. Despite Friday’s slump, the gas market remains vulnerable to dramatic price spikes at the first sign of a polar blast. There are two months of winter remaining, and hedge funds are holding the largest-ever bearish position in the fuel.

Greece, Cyprus, Israel sign EastMed pipeline deal

Greece, Cyprus and Israel yesterday signed an agreement for a huge pipeline project to ship gas from the eastern Mediterranean to Europe. The 2,000km (1,200-mile) EastMed pipeline will be able to carry between nine and 12bn cubic metres of gas a year from off shore reserves held by Israel and Cyprus to Greece, and then on to Italy and other southeastern European countries. The discovery of hydrocarbon reserves in the eastern Mediterranean has sparked a scramble for the energy riches.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades joined the ceremony at which their respective energy ministers signed the deal in the Greek capital. The EastMed project is expected to make the three countries key links in Europe’s energy supply chain. The EastMed alliance “is of enormous importance to the state of Israel’s energy future and its development into an energy power and also from the point of view of stability in the region,” Netanyahu said in a statement issued as he left Israel for Greece yesterday. Mitsotakis said the pipeline was of “geo-strategic importance” and would contribute to regional peace. Earlier, Greek Energy Minister Kostis Hatzidakis called it “a project of peace and co-operation”.

Anastasiades said his aim was “co-operation and not rivalry in the Middle East.” Avinoam Idan, a former Israeli government security off icial who is now a geostrategy expert at Haifa University, said of the deal: “It’s important for Israel, it’s important for the transit countries, Greece and Cyprus, and of course Europe.” As the new source of energy would not compete with Russian supplies to the EU, “there is no reason to see it as a big change in the geopolitical dynamic in Europe’s energy market,” he told AFP. The Greek economic daily Kathimerini said on Wednesday that Athens and Nicosia had been in a hurry to finalise EastMed so as “to counter any attempt to stop the project.” The cost of the installation from the eastern

Mediterranean to Italy is estimated at €6.0bn ($6.7bn).

Spain smooths way for LNG to boost biggest storage hub in Europe

Spain is undergoing the biggest overhaul of its liquefied natural gas system in an eff ort to boost its role as a key storage and trading hub for the fuel. With more LNG terminals than any other country in Europe, Spain is turning its domestic-focused network into one more accessible to global traders. Starting next year, the country plans to reform its storage limits and fees that have in the past deterred shippers from stockpiling and reloading LNG there. The timing couldn't be better as new plants from the US to Russia add ever more LNG to a market in a market that's already testing storage limits. That supply glut resulted in a record number of LNG cargoes sailing to Europe last month, a trend poised to continue through the rest of the year.

"The high costs of using Spanish infrastructure meant that Spain largely lost out to other European countries in the reload arbitrage to Asian markets in 2017-18," said Leyra Fernández Díaz, a global gas analyst at Energy Aspects Ltd. "This will likely no longer be the case after the reforms." Spain's terminals have about the same combined storage capacity as its two closest rivals, Britain and France, put together, according to Gas Infrastructure Europe. Spain also boasts the oldest working terminal in Europe, with its Barcelona facility in operation since 1968. From October next year, LNG traders using Spain’s terminals won’t need so-called bundled deals that oblige them to deliver gas into the nation’s grid. They’ll also be able to tender for space over set periods, a common practice at other European hubs. “LNG storage capacity will be off ered as an unbundled service through regular auctions as standard products: yearly, quarterly, monthly, daily and intra- daily,” said Agustin Alonso of Spain’s National Commission of Markets and Competition.

“Users will have to pay the price resulting from the auction for the whole amount of the capacity booked, regardless of whether they use it or not.” It’s a departure from the present system, which is geared toward supplying Spain, the European Union’s sixth-biggest gas user. Daily fees are charged for storage and stiff penalties are imposed for those who exceed set thresholds including how long they hold supplies. Abolishing those penalties will cut about $0.56/mmbtu from the cost of storing a cargo for a month, according to Energy Aspects. That’s about 10% of the current benchmark rate for LNG in Asia, the biggest user of the fuel. That would be welcome news to LNG traders who this summer and autumn had little choice but to dump cargoes in Spain as a wave of incoming supplies filled Europe’s storage sites. While Spain did import LNG as utilities burned more gas, what traders often need is a place to keep fuel for re-exporting or for use in the future. A reduction in tariff s still needs to be approved by the CNMC. Capacity products will be available from October 1, and the first auction of the yearly products will take place in September. Spain may still have a way to go to rival the trading hubs of Britain’s National Balancing Point and the Title Transfer Facility in the Netherlands.

Both have extensive cross-border pipeline links and liquid trading markets that Spain lacks. “This initiative might increase trading in Spain a little bit but will it make any diff erence to European gas trading? I doubt it,” said Patrick

Heather, a senior research fellow at the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies. Even so, the reforms complement plans unveiled earlier this year to treat all of Spain’s LNG terminals as a single virtual hub. The aim is to boost trading between the ports and reduce congestion at a particular location. Current rules make traders trade within a specific terminal. “Storing at onshore LNG terminals in Spain is to become more competitive than floating storage,” Energy Aspects’ Fernandez Diaz said. “The creation of the virtual LNG hub will abolish costly penalties for storing LNG.”

Qatargas LNG production achieves ‘best in class’ reliability performance of 98.8% in 2019

Qatargas’ liquefied natural gas (LNG) production is on target achieving the “best in class” reliability performance of 98.8% while the Laffan Refinery achieved a strong reliability of 98.6%, well ahead of the current year targets.

The world’s top LNG company’s “achievements in 2019 and its strong performance” in a wide range of areas were highlighted at its Annual Town Hall meetings held in Doha and Al Khor recently.

The company also completed “successful and safe” shutdowns of three of its mega LNG trains to ensure their reliability.

Qatargas maintained a “strong environmental and safety performance” as it achieved a flaring rate of 0.38 against a target of 0.44 thanks to a successful flare reduction project whereas the greenhouse gas (GHG) emission rate showed 0.35 against a target of 0.42.

In the year under review, Laffan Refinery 1 marked 10 years of operation without any Lost Time Incident (LTI) and the company successfully completed two key environmental projects – the Waste Materials Management facility and the Treated Industrial and Process Water facility.

Updates on the North Field Expansion (NFE) and North Filed Production Sustainability (NFPS) projects were provided during the event.

While the NFPS project will ensure that the current production capacity of the North Field offshore wells is well maintained into future, the NFE project will further enhance Qatar’s production capacity from the current 77mn tonnes per year (Mtpy) to 110mn Mtpy by 2024. Updates on the Barzan Pipeline and Helium 3 projects were also provided during the event.

The 2020 strategic goals, as explained during the meetings, included striving for an “Incident and Injury Free” workplace, improving uptime availability, reliability and utilisation of the LNG plants to achieve full plant capacity and meet supply rights; and enhancing and promoting reliability culture across the organisation to drive efficiency.

In addition, further strategic goals were identified as maximising revenue by penetrating new markets; maximising customer satisfaction while retaining contractual and financial performance; and achieving Qatarisation targets through a skill-based Qatarisation strategy.

At the events, Qatargas performance, challenges and strategic goals were reviewed.

The Town Hall meeting is an open forum for employees to meet with Qatargas' chief executive officer and the management leadership team for discussions on the company's performance, future challenges and strategic goals for the year ahead.
A question and answer session followed in which Qatargas CEO Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa al-Thani, and the management team replied to employee's questions and enquiries on work-related matters.

Natural gas in increased focus on world stage, al-Kaabi tells GECF meeting

Natural gas is getting increased focus on the world stage as it provides the right balance of reliable and secure sources of energy, which can not only drive growth but also help address the environmental concerns, Qatar has said.
HE Minister of State for Energy Affairs Saad bin Sherida al-Kaabi, made this remark at the extraordinary ministerial meeting of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea.
The extraordinary meeting is held in preparation of the fifth Heads of State Summit, which will also be held in Equatorial Guinea.
Referring to the relevance of associating the UN Sustainable Development Goals with greater access to a versatile,

flexible, economic, and clean source of energy, he said: “we are pleased to note the increasing attention natural gas is receiving as an important clean fuel in the global energy mix, and as a significant contributor to economic prosperity and environmental efforts to reduce emissions.”

Many countries around the world are reaching the conclusion that natural gas does provide the right balance of reliable and secure sources of energy, which can drive economic growth, and help address environmental concerns at the same time, said al-Kaabi, who led Qatar’s delegation.

Qatar will hold the sixth heads of state summit of GECF in 2021.

Demand slowdown in top gas buyer set to worsen

Bloomberg/ Beijing/Singapore

A slowdown in gas demand growth in China, the driver of global

use over the past two years, is expected to slacken further, adding to investor concern as supply continues to build.
Consumption in 2021-2025 will grow at a slower pace than it has in the current five-year period, a researcher at China’s economic planning department said at the BloombergNEF summit in Shanghai on Wednesday. Furthermore, a weaker economy and rising imports via pipeline could shrink the share of liquefied natural gas in the overall Chinese market, according to gas utility ENN Energy Holdings Ltd.
The country’s overall gas use has expanded 9.5% so far this year, down from 18% in 2018, amid concerns that the slowing economy has prompted the government to focus less on pollution control, which had earlier helped spur demand for the fuel.
That contrasts with the boom in 2017-2018, when President Xi Jinping’s calls for blue skies sparked a race among local governments and businesses to switch millions of homes and factories from burning coal to using more of cleaner-burning gas.
The demand slowdown has pushed LNG prices in Asia lower by almost 40% this year, a slump also aided by China’s rising domestic output of the fuel.
China’s gas demand growth will likely slow over the duration of the 14th Five-Year Plan from 2021 to 2025 compared with current levels, Tian Lei, an assistant professor at the National Development & Reform Commission’s Energy Research Institute, said in an interview on the sidelines of the BNEF summit.
Consumption will probably be weaker at the start of the five-year period, before accelerating toward the end due to environmental pressure, he added.
A sharp deceleration in China’s economic growth — with gross domestic product expanding in the third quarter at the slowest rate in decades — coupled with rising pipeline imports following the start-up of the Power of Siberia line from Russia, could cut LNG’s market share in China and lower import growth, according to Mark Lay, deputy general manager of ENN.
China’s LNG imports gained 14% this year through October after

rising more than 40% in each of the prior two years. Increased domestic gas production amid the nation's efforts to bolster energy security will also erode overseas purchases, said Daniela Li, a BloombergNEF analyst.
Despite prospects of a slowdown, the current gas consumption levels still represent "extraordinary growth," said Bernard Samuels, vice president of China gas development at Royal Dutch Shell Plc. The government's plans for a national pipeline company could help lower prices for domestic customers and boost demand, he said.

Natural gas plants set for revival in Germany as carbon costs soar

Uniper SE is preparing to switch on more natural-gas plants as higher costs for carbon allowances shifted the economics of the power generation business away from coal.
Gas plants also are benefiting both from a slump in the price of the fuel. Uniper, one of Europe's largest utilities, will bring back on line as much as 3.5 gigawatts of gas plants that were mothballed when market conditions were less favourable. That's almost a third of its gas-plant capacity.
"Carbon markets have shown they work," chief executive officer Andreas Schierenbeck said in an interview in Bloomberg's

office in Frankfurt. “This summer, carbon prices were very high and gas is very cheap, very competitive. The logic is clear: you need as much a double carbon certificates for coal than for gas.”

The remarks illustrate the latest shift in the ever-changing economics of generating electricity. While Chancellor Angela Merkel is moving to phase out the most polluting fossil fuels, emissions in Germany have actually risen in recent years as the government took nuclear plants off the grid, boosting the need for coal.

Now the government is seeking to remove both nuclear and coal plants from the nation’s power supply, eliminating about half of Germany’s power generation capacity. The rise in carbon costs has helped encourage that shift by making it profitable for utilities to switch on gas plants instead of coal.

The move will help Germany reduce pollution. Natural gas emits as much as 55% less carbon dioxide than coal. While the government is seeking to spur renewables to meet its climate commitments, industry executives, energy forecasters and investors say that more gas will be needed for the time being. Gas plants can help balance the grid until there’s enough wind, solar and battery capacity to ensure supply day and night and on breeze-free days.

“With the nuclear and coal exit, our gas plants will have to produce more,” said Schierenbeck. “We need more gas for power generation as a big part of our power plants is on the reserve, and we will probably take them out.”

Carbon permits under the European Union’s emissions-trading system, the world’s biggest cap-and-trade programme, were at €23.70 a tonne ($26.14) on Friday, 20% higher than a year ago. Analysts and traders expect that annual demand will outweigh supply at least until the mid-2020s.

German gas prices are 40% lower than a year ago. Weighing on prices are abundant supplies arriving both by pipeline and in LNG tankers. That has pushed storage levels to near capacity and well above the average for the past five years.

Uniper has the capacity to generate 10 gigawatts of power from natural gas in Germany. It will be one of the companies hit quickly by legislation to phase out coal in Germany. Some versions of the draft bill suggest the country will shut down 5 gigawatts of hard coal capacity by 2022.

Uniper owns more than 3 gigawatts of power plants that burn hard coal and is building another 1 gigawatt-plant in western Germany. It expects to get approval from the government to start operating that facility, named Datteln-4.

The new power unit has not entered service yet due to ongoing structural problems with its boiler. Uniper now expects to start it in the middle of next year. The company has argued that the plant should open despite Germany's plan to exit coal.

"Datteln 4 will probably be the last new coal power plant we will see in Germany," said Schierenbeck. "I would guess it would be also true for Europe. I have the feeling there's understanding from the government that it makes sense to keep the newer and most efficient instead of the older and less environment friendly."

Uniper is Europe's fifth largest greenhouse gas emissions polluter in the power sector based on 2017 data, according to Sandbag, a climate change think tank in London.

EU bank takes 'quantum leap' to end fossil-fuel financing

By Ewa Krukowska, Bloomberg

The European Investment Bank adopted an unprecedented strategy to end funding for fossil fuel energy projects, in a move expected to support Europe’s plans to become the first climate-neutral continent.

The board of the Luxembourg-based lending arm of the European Union decided at a meeting on Thursday to approve a new energy policy that includes increased support for clean-energy projects. The bank will not consider new financing of unabated fossil fuels, including natural gas, from the end of 2021.

With more than half a trillion dollars in outstanding loans, the EIB is the biggest multilateral financial institution in the world. Given the EIB’s market impact and influence over the lending strategies of investors, its decision could end up depriving polluting projects from other sources of financing as well.

The lender's move to prioritize energy efficiency and renewable-energy projects will reinforce the Green Deal being pushed by Ursula von der Leyen, the incoming president of the European Commission. She wants the institution to become a climate bank and help unlock 1 trillion euros ($1.1 trillion) to shift the economy toward cleaner forms of energy.

"Climate is the top issue on the political agenda of our time," EIB President Werner Hoyer said in a statement, calling the decision to transition away from financing fossil fuels a "quantum leap in its ambition."

The EIB decision is part of a broader push across the EU's most powerful institutions that's catapulted the bloc to the forefront of global efforts to fight climate change. New European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde has pledged to make climate change more of a focus for the institution, which is considering adding climate-related risks to its stress-test scenarios, in what could potentially make exposure to high-carbon footprint projects a liability for the balance sheets of financial firms in the continent.

The 28-nation EU wants to step up its climate ambition in sync with the landmark 2015 Paris agreement to fight global warming, after the U.S. turned its back on the accord. With EU leaders considering committing to climate neutrality by 2050, Europe is a step ahead of other major emitters, including China, India and Japan, which haven't so far translated their voluntary Paris pledges into equally ambitious binding national measures.

"For the EIB to stop funding fossil fuel projects is a game-changer that begins to deliver the EU's vision for climate leadership as laid out in the Green Deal," said Eliot Whittington, director of the European Corporate Leaders Group.

“We need this to act as an unequivocal signal into the financial system to encourage other multilateral lenders to follow suit.”

Von der Leyen, who is due to assume her new job as head of the EU’s executive arm in the coming weeks, also wants the bloc to raise its current target of cutting emissions by at least 40 percent by 2030 from 1990 levels. That may involve a reduction in pollution in the order of 50% or even 55% to counter the more frequent heat waves, storms and floods tied to global warming. Fossil fuels such as coal, oil and natural gas are leading contributors to climate change.

The EIB deal resolved a two-month deadlock where Germany and some central European nations sought to soften the proposed rules and make certain natural-gas projects eligible for financing. The strategy adopted on Thursday allows for continued support for projects already in the works that are vital for Europe’s energy security as long as they are appraised and approved by the end of 2021.

“Hats off to the European Investment Bank and those countries who fought hard to help it set a global benchmark today,” said Sebastien Godinot, economist at the environmental lobby WWF Europe. “All public and private banks must now follow suit and end funding of coal, oil and gas to safeguard investments and tackle the climate crisis.”

New Standards

The EIB new policy includes a new Emissions Performance Standard of 250 grams of carbon dioxide per kilowatt-hour, replacing the current 550 grams standard. That means that in order to qualify for financing, new power-generation projects have to be mitigated by various technologies that significantly improve their emissions performance, EIB Vice President Andrew McDowell said in a conference call.

The EIB, which last year invested more than 16 billion euros in climate-action projects, is preparing to play a larger role in spurring low-carbon technologies.

“This is not a last step, there are many more steps to come,” McDowell said. “But this is probably one of the most difficult parts of this journey that we’re having to take.”

China bid for commodity price power extends to natural gas

China became the world’s biggest natural gas buyer last year. Now it wants to start setting its own price.

That’s because importers have been paying rates influenced by events unrelated to China’s supply and demand balance from

European weather to Middle East conflicts. So like it has for oil, gold and iron ore before, producers, distributors and financial exchanges in the top commodities market are seeking prices that they say better reflect Chinese fundamentals, and in their own currency.

The search for an internationally recognised Chinese natural gas price, including a proposed futures contract, follows the larger pattern of the world's biggest commodities consumer seeking a greater say in how to price the raw materials it consumes.
'We've been taken advantage of by foreign firms, Xu Tong, a deputy general manager of distributor Beijing Gas Group Co, said in an interview. Domestic indexes will 'reduce premiums significantly.

China is also opening its commodities derivatives markets to foreign traders, partly in an effort to broaden the appeal of its currency, the yuan. In March 2018, an exchange in Shanghai introduced an oil futures contract for overseas investors, while Dalian followed two months later by opening up its iron ore trade.

China's natural gas demand has boomed in recent years as the government of President Xi Jinping pushed industrial and residential customers away from coal. But domestic production of the gas hasn't kept pace with consumption. Imports, meanwhile, surged almost 32% last year.

Domestic gas sales follow two different pricing structures: a government-set price for pipeline supplies, which is open to some negotiation between buyers and sellers, and the unregulated market for liquefied natural gas transported on trucks. And for imports, China mostly pays in US dollars at prices based mainly on either global oil or gas benchmarks set in the US or Europe.

The structure can contribute to losses for Chinese companies that resell overseas gas at lower domestic rates. PetroChina Co, the top oil and gas supplier, has chalked up $34bn of losses since 2011, when it began regularly reporting the figures.

LNG contracts first became tied to oil prices at a time when the fuel competed with petroleum used for home heating and power generation. More importantly, oil provided transparent and liquid price benchmarks that allowed buyers to hedge and sellers to secure bank financing. But prices have begun to uncouple as the global gas market deepens.
'Gas fundamentals can't be reflected by oil they are two separate products, Wu Yifeng, deputy general manager of natural gas at PetroChina's international unit, said in an interview in Beijing.

Europe and the US have natural gas benchmarks that reflect supply and demand in their respective markets and are liquid enough to bank on. Asia doesn't have that yet. A futures contract built around the current spot benchmark in northeast Asia assessed by S & P Global Platts is gaining traction, but remains a far cry from what's seen in the west.

Chinese gas companies are trying to build their own, drawing on the success of the nation's Dalian iron ore futures, which global traders look to for daily price signals because of the sheer size of the market.

The Shanghai Futures Exchange has said it plans to launch natural gas futures, though no timing has been set. The Shanghai Petroleum & Natural Gas Exchange, or SHPGX, hosts auctions for small quantities of domestic gas and publishes daily trucked LNG prices.

Whether China is able to achieve the clout it desires with gas prices may depend on ease-of-use and investor interest. Currently, crude oil, iron ore, rubber and purified terephthalic acid (used to make plastics and polyester) are open to foreigners, and most other commodity futures are isolated to only the domestic market. The gas contract SHFE is mulling will allow offshore entities to trade.

Another key factor for China’s pricing ambitions is a long-awaited national pipeline reform. The move to give more suppliers access to the transportation networks, which is now mainly operated by the three state-owned giants, must happen for prices to freely reflect the broader market, said Chen Gang, an assistant to the general manager at SHPGX.

Only then can domestic prices become a benchmark, with support from the derivatives market, according to Chen. The final step may be to link those prices to imported gas, he said.
Source: Gulf Times

QP wins exploration rights in three Brazil offshore blocks

Qatar Petroleum (QP), the country’s hydrocarbon bellwether, has won exploration rights in three offshore blocks in Brazil, as part of two bidding consortia.

The winning bids were announced by Brazil’s National Agency of Petroleum, Natural Gas, and Biofuels (ANP) at a public bidding session held in Rio de Janeiro.

Competing bids were submitted to the ANP and the winners were announced throughout the course of Thursday’s public session.

QP won the exploration rights for block [541] in the Campos basin as part of a consortium comprising affiliates of Total (Operator with a 40% interest), QP (40% interest), and Petronas (20%).

It also won the exploration rights for blocks [659 and 713] in the Campos basin as part of a consortium comprising affiliates of Shell (Operator with a 40% interest), Chevron (35% interest), and QP (25% interest).

“This successful result is the fourth of its kind, which further strengthen QP’s footprint in Brazil, marking yet another successful step towards realising our international growth strategy, and turning Brazil into a cornerstone of our international portfolio,” said HE the Minister of State for Energy Affairs as well as QP president and chief executive, Saad bin Sherida al-Kaabi.

QP, an integrated national oil corporation responsible for the sustainable development of the oil and gas industry in Qatar and beyond, covers the entire spectrum of the oil and gas value chain locally, regionally, and internationally, and include the exploration, refining, production, marketing and sales of oil and gas, liquefied natural gas, natural gas liquids, gas to liquids products, refined products, petrochemicals, fertilisers, steel and aluminium.