Oil bulls cut and run as US trade war derails market

Bloomberg/New York

Crude oil’s biggest plunge in two years has money managers heading for the hills.

Hedge funds cut their net-long position – the difference between wagers on a price gain and bets on a drop – in Brent crude by the most since 2016. Bulls fled the market on concern that the escalating US-China trade war will imperil economic growth, denting oil demand amid signs of mounting supply from the US to Saudi Arabia.

“Extended trade tensions with China threaten global economic growth,” said Rob Thummel, managing director at Tortoise Capital Advisors LLC, which manages $16bn in energy-related assets. An economic slowdown would “negatively impact global crude oil demand growth” as output from Saudi Arabia and Libya rises.

Oil has tumbled from a four-year high in May as President Donald Trump prepares to slap tariffs on $500bn of Chinese goods. Though Trump also leaned on Saudi Arabia to lower prices by pumping more, the kingdom said it will actually trim crude exports next month after bolstering production the most in three years in June.

Saudi Arabia “does not try to push oil into the market beyond its customers’ needs,” the Energy Ministry said in a statement on Thursday.

The world’s largest oil exporter is fulfilling a pledge made in late June that the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries and allies including Russia would boost output by about 1mn barrels a day.

Output from Libya rose last week as production from its eastern fields climbed, offsetting thousands of barrels in production lost from the partial shutdown of the country’s biggest deposit after gunmen kidnapped workers there. “The return of Libya was a really big thing, and the addition from Saudi Arabia,” said James Williams, president of London, Arkansas-based energy researcher WTRG Economics.

The Trump administration, meanwhile, was said to be considering tapping the nation’s emergency oil supply to tame rising fuel prices before congressional elections in November, according to people familiar with the matter.

Hedge funds slashed their Brent net-long position by 21% in the week ended July 17 to 353,245 contracts, according to ICE Futures Europe data on futures and options released on Friday. That was the lowest level since August 2017.

Money managers’ net-long position in West Texas Intermediate crude fell by 7.4% to 401,690 futures and options, the biggest decline since May, according to US Commodity Futures Trading Commission data released Friday. Longs also slipped 7.4%, while shorts fell 7.5%.

Though crude has recovered from lows reached in late June as Opec weighed an output boost, trade tensions have roiled the market. A measure of crude volatility soared last week to levels last seen almost a year ago.

US supply data, meanwhile, showed mixed signals for the market. Gasoline held in US storage tanks dropped by the most since May and fuel demand increased, according to government

data, overshadowing the biggest increase in American crude inventories since April.
US production gains have "caused some players who don't have conviction to exit," said Gene McGillian, manager of market research at Tradition Energy. "We saw some topping out of Brent around $79 and the idea that the Saudis and Russians were willing to add oil back into the market."
In the fuel market, money managers trimmed their net-long position in benchmark US gasoline by 9.1%, the first decline in three weeks. The net-bullish position on diesel slid 27%, the most since February.

Exxon Faces Russian Clash as Rosneft Files $1.4 Billion Claim

Exxon Mobil Corp. faces a legal clash with Russian oil giant Rosneft PJSCover its largest energy project in the country, with a potential liability of more than $400 million.

Russia's state-owned oil behemoth filed an arbitration claim alleging "unjust enrichment" against all the Sakhalin-1 co-owners, including its own units, for a total of 89 billion rubles ($1.41 billion), according to the country's legal database. The offshore project is Exxon's flagship in the nation after quitting most of its developments earlier this year due to sanctions. The U.S. company operates the venture with a 30 percent stake.

The press office for Exxon's unit in Russia said it's "aware of the court action, rejects the claims and will take action to defend the rights of the Sakhalin-1 consortium," without elaborating.

Rosneft’s claim covers a period from 2015 through to May this year, although no further details were published. Rosneft didn’t immediately respond to calls and messages seeking comment.

Sakhalin-1, which pumps more than 200,000 barrels of crude per day, is the only major oil project in Russia still operated by an international company. It’s an exception in a nation where state-controlled companies have steadily expanded their control of energy resources, including developments around Sakhalin Island off the Pacific coast.

Kremlin Control

In 2007, during President Vladimir Putin’s second term, the Kremlin pressured Royal Dutch Shell Plc to sell a controlling stake in the Sakhalin-2 oil and gas project to Gazprom PJSC. In 2015, Russia’s audit chamber told the nation’s parliament that the government lost out on about $5 billion of taxes and other payments from the Sakhalin-1 venture because Exxon failed to increase natural gas sales.

Exxon in turn filed a claim over taxation of Sakhalin-1 three years ago, which last year ended up with an out-of-court deal with the Russian government. Despite halting some drilling earlier this year due to international sanctions, Exxon said it could continue operations at Sakhalin-1 because it predates the 2013 deals that were subject to the restrictions.

An arbitration court of Russia’s Sakhalin region registered the Rosneft claim on July 20 and set a preliminary hearing for September 10, according to the legal database. The court asked Rosneft to provide details of an agreement for the development of a northern tip of Chayvo field off Sakhalin Island. The Moscow-based producer has said it’s developing this area on its own, while it’s bordering with Sakhalin-1’s Chayvo field.

Rosneft units own 20 percent of the Sakhalin-1 project, as does India’s ONGC Videsh Ltd. Japan’s Sakhalin Oil & Gas Development Co. holds the remaining 30 percent.

Lawmakers, Lobbyists and the Administration Join Forces to Overhaul the Endangered Species Act

WASHINGTON — The Endangered Species Act, which for 45 years has safeguarded fragile wildlife while blocking ranching, logging and oil drilling on protected habitats, is coming under attack from lawmakers, the White House and industry on a scale not seen in decades, driven partly by fears that the Republicans will lose ground in November’s midterm elections.

In the past two weeks, more than two dozen pieces of legislation, policy initiatives and amendments designed to weaken the law have been either introduced or voted on in Congress or proposed by the Trump administration.

The actions included a bill to strip protections from the gray wolf in Wyoming and along the western Great Lakes; a plan to keep the sage grouse, a chicken-size bird that inhabits millions of oil-rich acres in the West, from being listed as endangered for the next decade; and a measure to remove from the endangered list the American burying beetle, an orange-flecked insect that has long been the bane of oil companies that would like to drill on the land where it lives.

“It’s probably the best chance that we have had in 25 years to actually make any substantial changes,” said Richard Pombo, a former congressman from California who more than a decade ago led an attempt to rethink the act and is now a lobbyist whose clients include mining and water management companies.

He and others argue that the act has become skewed toward restricting economic development and Americans’ livelihoods rather than protecting threatened animals.

The new push to undo the wildlife protection law comes as Republicans control the White House and both chambers of Congress, and is led by a president who has made deregulation — the loosening of not only environmental protections but banking rules, car fuel efficiency standardsand fair housing enforcement — a centerpiece of his administration.

The Trump administration unveiled its main effort to overhaul the Endangered Species Act on Thursday, when the Interior Department and the Commerce Department proposed fundamental changes to the law. Those include a provision that for the first time could allow the economic consequences of protecting plants or animals to be considered when deciding whether or not they face extinction.

If the proposal is finalized, species that remain on the endangered list would still see their habitats protected, but it would become more difficult to list a new species for protection and easier to remove those now on the list.

The myriad proposals reflect a wish list assembled over decades by oil and gas companies, libertarians and ranchers in Western states, who have long sought to overhaul the law, arguing that it represents a costly incursion of federal regulations on their land and livelihoods. Until now, those efforts have largely failed, even during periods when Republicans controlled both the White House and Congress.

Advocates of the environmental law agree that the proposals signal a critical moment. “The last few weeks have seen the most coordinated set of attacks on the Endangered Species Act I’ve faced since I got to Washington,” said Representative Raúl Grijalva of Arizona, the ranking Democrat on the House Natural Resources Committee. “This is a crucial test,” he said.

The Endangered Species Act was passed by Congress in 1973, and signed by President Richard Nixon at a time when using federal authority to protect threatened species was less controversial. The act has been credited with the resurgence of the American alligator, which had been hunted to near extinction for the use of its skin in purses and other goods; the gray whale, depleted by commercial fishing in parts of the Pacific Ocean; and the bald eagle, which is flourishing again after nearly disappearing from much of the United States.

The federal Fish and Wildlife Service annually spends about $1.4 billion to protect threatened plants and animals, according to the agency’s most recent expenditure report in 2016, an amount that environmentalists say has not kept pace with the need. But industry leaders say that money is wasted protecting species that don’t need it and paying green groups’ litigation fees.

Take the case of the northern spotted owl, which has been a rallying cry for both sides of the debate since it was listed as threatened in 1990. The logging industry has long blamed the owl habitats for a crippling decline in timber harvests, sparking a vicious battle over restricting the economies and livelihoods of local communities.

But while opponents of the law cite an economic burden, there has been little comprehensive analysis of the precise economic costs or benefits of either enforcing or revising it.

“Trying to put a number on the cost to industry is incredibly challenging,” said Rebecca Epanchin-Niell, an expert on the economics of the Endangered Species Act at Resources for the Future, a nonpartisan research organization in Washington. Ms. Epanchin-Niell and several other economists noted that given the economic and geographical diversity of the industries affected — oil companies, ranchers, farmers, landowners, real estate developers and others — it is difficult to put a clear price tag on the law’s overall economic effects.

As to the economic benefits of preserving an endangered species, Ms. Epanchin-Niell pointed to what advocates for the law might describe as a “moral obligation” to guard against extinction. “Economists don’t have tools to put a price on these intangible values,” she said.

Efforts in previous presidential administrations to weaken the Endangered Species Act were often met with some bipartisan resistance. But the profile of the Republican Party has changed since then. Over the past decade, opposition to environmental regulations has become a more ingrained part of the G.O.P.'s identity, particularly as exemplified by President Trump.

"This is the first time that we've seen an orchestrated effort by the president, the Republican leaders in the House, the industry and the Interior Department all working together in a concentrated effort to eviscerate the act," said Bruce Babbitt, who served as the interior secretary for eight years in the Clinton administration.

Opponents of the act say the current mood is simply the fruition of decades of ignored attempts to enact reasonable modifications to the law — for instance, government compensation to offset losses when landowners are unable to use portions of their property deemed critical habitat.

"Anyone who tries to do even modest reform is completely demagogued," said Kathleen Sgamma, president of the Western Energy Alliance, a trade association for the oil and gas industry. Ms. Sgamma said environmental activists and others have also failed to understand how the law has been hurting farmers and ranchers as well as industry.

Brad Goehring, a vineyard owner from California's Central Valley, said he is a prime example. Mr. Goehring said he can't farm on about a quarter of his property because it is considered critical habitat for a freshwater crustacean known as the fairy shrimp.

"Think of the ramifications where you owe the bank money, you have loans to pay off and you're told you can't use all your property," he said. Mr. Goehring ran for Congress as a Republican in 2010 in part on a platform of modifying the act.

While farmers like Mr. Goehring have for years urged Congress to enact changes, the recent push has been led by David Bernhardt, the deputy interior secretary, a former oil lobbyist and lawyer whose legal clients included the Independent Petroleum Association of America.

Last December, Mr. Bernhardt convened a meeting at the Interior Department between senior political appointees and career staffers, at which he laid out his plans to streamline the law. Over the course of the spring, that plan was translated into the policy proposal unveiled on Thursday.

At the same time, on Capitol Hill, the Congressional Western Caucus, a group of House lawmakers, began coordinating a strategy. On July 12, the lawmakers unveiled a package of nine bills that, if enacted, would see more permanent changes to the law than those pushed by Mr. Bernhardt's proposal. Legislation that is passed by Congress and signed into law by the president is less easily undone than regulatory changes.

While it is unclear if the lawmakers' individual bills could become law this year, they also worked to add amendments to two must-pass spending bills, including the National Defense Authorization Act, which specifies the annual budget for the Pentagon.

The House-passed version of that spending bill includes provisions that would prohibit the Interior Department from putting two species of land birds, the sage grouse and the greater prairie chicken, on the endangered species list for at least 10 years. That would ensure that the habitat of those birds, encompassing millions of acres across 11 states, could remain open for oil and gas development. (The Interior Department is also moving forward with a separate regulatory plan to roll back sage grouse protections.)

In past years, such provisions would likely have died in the Senate, chiefly because they were opposed by Senator John McCain, the Republican of Arizona.

But Mr. McCain today is recuperating from brain cancer and has not been active in Washington for several months. Shepherding the measure in his stead is Senator James Inhofe, the Republican of Oklahoma who has made a signature issue of advocacy on behalf of the oil industry and denying the established science of human-caused global warming.

It is expected that Mr. Inhofe will champion a provision in the House defense bill that would remove endangered species protections for the American burying beetle. The insect has a protected habitat in just four states — but one of them is Mr. Inhofe's home state of Oklahoma.

"I think the Endangered Species Act is endangered," said Andrew Rosenberg, director of the Union of Concerned Scientists. "They haven't been able to do this for 20 years, but this looks like their one chance."

Republicans also added at least nine endangered species-related amendments to the spending bill that funds the Interior Department. Among other provisions, that bill would remove the gray wolf from the endangered species list. It would also prohibit the Interior Department from reintroducing the endangered grizzly bear into the North Cascades ecosystem of Washington State, something lawmakers from the region say could threaten the area's recreation livelihood.

Senator John Barrasso, the Republican of Wyoming who chairs the Environment Committee, introduced a draft bill that overlaps with many of the House proposals.

"We're all aware that the Endangered Species Act hasn't undergone any significant updates in over 40 years," said Representative Rob Bishop, Republican of Utah and chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, in a statement. "Now is the time to modernize this antiquated law to simultaneously benefit both endangered species and the American people."

The UAE Lobby: Subverting British democracy?

A Public Interest Investigation by Spinwatch

On the 17th of July 2018, Public Interest Investigations (PII) presented a report at the House of Commons, publicised on its website Spinwatch, that focused on the UAE's lobbying efforts within the UK. The report illustrated how through the UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash and the lobbying firm Quiller Consultants, the UAE initiated a comprehensive campaign of targeting journalists, policymakers, academics, businessmen, civil servants and MPs between 2011 and 2013. This campaign was designed to, and culminated in, two main policy changes within the UK government between 2011 and 2013. Firstly, the UK's official position vis-à-vis the Morsi regime in Egypt changed from what was tacit support to a more ardently anti-Morsi campaign that served to undermine his presidency and offer support to the Sisi-led coup against him. Secondly, the UK's position against the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar was made more aggressive as a result of the UAE's lobbying. Both of these policy changes were enforced through the weaponisation of UAE-UK trade deals, such as the BAE's Eurofighter Typhoon jet deal with the UAE.

Aside from the ways in which UAE lobbying influenced UK governmental policy directly, it has also been made clear by the report that the UAE's efforts to affect the British milieu also extend to the dissemination of information via media. Here, there were continuous attempts to both silence supposed Muslim Brotherhood sympathisers in the BBC, BBC Arabic, and in Chatham House. Through multiple complaints, and delegations, sent by the UAE to Number 10 Downing Street, the UAE managed to obtain some tangible results in the obtainment of a reduction, or removal from position, of those critical of the UAE's human rights record and who displayed sympathic views towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Additionally, aside from the BBC, there has been a general shift in the rhetoric of a number of journalists in the UK as a result of the lobbying. Through briefings between Anwar Gargash and a range of different journalists and academics, including but not limited to individuals such as Con Coughlin and Andrew Gilligan, the UAE managed to fashion an anti-Muslim Brotherhood, anti-Iran, and anti-Qatar echo chamber that spans across a range of different media organisations at the forefront of the provision of news in the UK.

Furthermore, the UAE campaign to penetrate UK political life has also, as noted in the report, extended to efforts to designate and label senior members of the Qatari royal family as 'terrorists'. As the report notes, the UAE sought to generate research exemplifying the links between the Qatari royal family and terrorism through ICSR and King's College London professor Shiraz Maher. The lobbying firm Quiller discussed a £20,000 a month payment for this research. In turn, this research was intended to be operationalised in order for the government to officially list members of the Qatari royal family as ‘terrorists’.

Collectively, therefore, Spinwatch’s report provides damning evidence of the ways in which the UAE has penetrated democracy and stifled debate within UK political and social life. This penetration represents a clear breach of our parliamentary democracy and the human right to civil and political freedoms and transparency. The report also calls into question and number of issues so as to ensure a lack of continuity in the tactics used by the UAE. For example, it exemplifies the need for lobbying reform, a closer examination of press regulation, and a more in-depth investigation into the links between governmental pressure and the rhetoric espoused by the BBC. That said, the AOHR UK welcomes these calls for reform and commends Spinwatch and the PII on this ground-breaking report. The report has indeed served to saliently highlight the ways in which democracy in the UK is being eroded by outside entities with clear politicised agendas that contravene the principles of democracy and democratic freedom.

Turkish finance minister says he won’t fight markets

Reuters/Ankara

Turkey will not fight with markets but instead pursue a win-win relationship with them while ensuring Turkey has an effective central bank, Finance Minister Berat Albayrak was quoted as saying yesterday.
Concerns about the central bank’s independence had intensified when President Tayyip Erdogan appointed son-in-law Albayrak as treasury and finance minister, boosting expectations that the president – a self-described “enemy of interest rates” – would look to exercise greater influence over monetary policy.
The Turkish lira has been hammered this year, losing a fifth of its value against the US dollar, on concerns about the central bank’s ability to rein in double-digit inflation, while Erdogan has repeatedly called for lower interest rates.
Albayrak, speaking to reporters on a flight to Argentina for a G20 summit, also said the government would not compromise budget discipline and that there would be a noticeable improvement in inflation, broadcaster NTV reported.
“We will not compromise budget discipline and a programme that is down to earth will be prepared,” Albayrak was quoted as saying.
“We aim for an effective central bank. The central bank sees

and builds the fiscal life in a correct way. Turkey will never again be this attractive for foreign investors.”

The government’s medium-term programme (OVP) will also change into a “strong and solid” five-year strategy, Albayrak said.

With Erdogan having merged the Treasury and the Finance Ministry, Albayrak’s appointment effectively saw him replace both Mehmet Simsek and Naci Agbal in a cabinet that now has no obvious investor-friendly ministers.

Albayrak’s comments, therefore, are closely watched by investors for clues on whether he will seek to calm financial markets by adopting a more orthodox approach to monetary policy or reiterate Erdogan’s views that high interest rates stoke inflation.

Following his appointment, Albayrak had said the central bank is independent and will do whatever economic realities and market conditions necessitate.

Earlier yesterday, state media quoted Albayrak as saying that Turkey was continuing its strong economic growth trend and that the foundations of its economy were strong.

The state-run Anadolu news agency quoted Albayrak as saying that the government aimed to maintain prudent fiscal policies and healthy credit growth, carrying out structural reforms and strengthening Turkey’s monetary policy framework.

“Turkey’s economy continues its strong growth momentum.

Our economic foundations are going to be strong and our outlook is promising,” Albayrak said.

The central bank’s monetary policy committee, which has raised rates by 500 basis points since April in an effort to put a floor under the currency, will meet on July 24.

On the sidelines of the G20 summit in Buenos Aires, Albayrak said on Twitter that he had met with his US, Chinese, German, Brazilian, South Korean, French and Indonesian counterparts.

Greece’s Creditors Agree to Landmark Debt Deal as Bailout Saga Ends

Greece’s euro-area creditors struck a landmark deal to ease repayment terms on some of the nation’s mountain of debt, clearing the way for the country to exit the lifeline that’s kept it afloat since 2010.

The debt compromise reached in Luxembourg by the bloc’s finance ministers comes after months of acrimonious talks and just as the Mediterranean nation is set to leave its bailout program in August. A deal to ease Greek debt has long been seen as a key ingredient in the country’s successful return to economic health and foray back into financial markets.

An accord was reached in the early hours of the morning as attempts to find a compromise repeatedly hit a wall. The biggest holdout was Germany, which resisted granting Athens more money. In the final compromise, Berlin signed off on a longer maturity extension but managed to limit the tranche of bailout money.

“The deal is good news for Greece and on the optimistic side of what was expected,” said Athanasios Vamvakidis, a strategist at Bank of America Merrill Lynch in London. “Greece buys more time and the debt becomes sustainable, at least on paper. The deal also includes a clear post-program monitoring framework to make sure Greece sticks to the targets. Markets are reassured for now. But it is up to Greece to succeed. Growth is the key.”

Greek bonds rose following the Eurogroup decision, with the yield on its 10-year debt falling 23 basis points to 4.01 percent. The spread over comparable German bonds narrowed to 375 basis points.

Grace Period

Under the agreed debt-relief plan, maturities on 96.6 billion euros ($112 billion) of loans Greece has received from its second bailout would be pushed out by 10 years. The extension will be accompanied by a 10-year grace period in interest and amortization payments on the same loans.

Both these steps are part of a broader package of measures aimed to ensure that Greece will be able to service its debt over the next decades.

“We believe that the debt is now viable, we can have access to the markets now and in a context of surveillance and by continuing our reforms we can pursue this,” Greek Finance Minister Euclid Tsakalotos said after the meeting.

The creditors also agreed to a final disbursement of 15 billion euros, aimed to help Greece repay arrears, finance maturing debt and build up a cash buffer of 24.1 billion euros that will help it access financial markets. Some of that cash could be used to buy back debt it owes to the International Monetary Fund or the European Central Bank, which is more expensive and matures sooner.

In the longer term, euro-area creditors said they could consider measures such as further re-profiling or longer grace periods of loans if needed if economic conditions are unexpectedly worse than anticipated.

Debt Sustainability

“We welcome the Eurogroup’s readiness to consider further debt measures in the long term in case adverse economic developments were to materialize,” European Central Bank President Mario Draghi said. “We believe that the adoption of the set of debt measures agreed by the Eurogroup will improve debt sustainability in the medium term.”

Other agreed debt measures include the return to Athens of some 4 billion euros in profits the euro-area central bank made on their Greek bond holdings and the abolition of a 220 million-euro annual penalty attached to some of the country’s loans.

These measures will be linked to Greece’s performance after the end of its bailout, and will be disbursed in slices over the next four years as long as the country doesn’t stray from its pre-agreed reforms and budget path. As part of the debt deal, Greece is foreseen to maintain a primary surplus — which excludes interest payments — worth 2.2 percent of gross domestic product from 2023 until 2060.

Close Monitoring

This means Athens is set to remain under close monitoring by its former bailout auditors, in order to ensure it continues implementing reforms in a small set of areas such as privatizations and the reduction of bad loans.

“We will continue to look at whether the reforms are sticking,” Dutch Finance Minister Wopke Hoekstra said on Friday.

Concerns remain about whether these measures will be enough to revive Greece’s cratered economy, which shrank almost by a quarter during the crisis.

“Under these conditions, Greece is unlikely to achieve fast growth, and therefore will be unable to pay back its debt in full despite a 10-year postponement of maturities granted by the EU,” said Nicholas Economides, professor of Economics at the Stern School of Business at New York University.

Another cause for investor concern may come from the fact that the IMF did not activate its planned lifeline for Greece. The Washington-based fund had repeatedly said it would do so once the country’s euro-area creditors took sufficient steps to ensure its debt remained sustainable in the long term.

Still, the IMF gave its blessing to the debt agreement.

“There is no doubt in our mind that Greece will be in a position to access financial markets,” IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde said, adding that for the medium term, the agreed measures would ensure Greek debt remained sustainable. “As far as the longer term is concerned, we have reservations.”

— With assistance by Radoslav Tomek, Alessandro Speciale, Sotiris Nikas, Birgit Jennen, Joao Lima, Neil Chatterjee, Richard Bravo, and Alexander Weber

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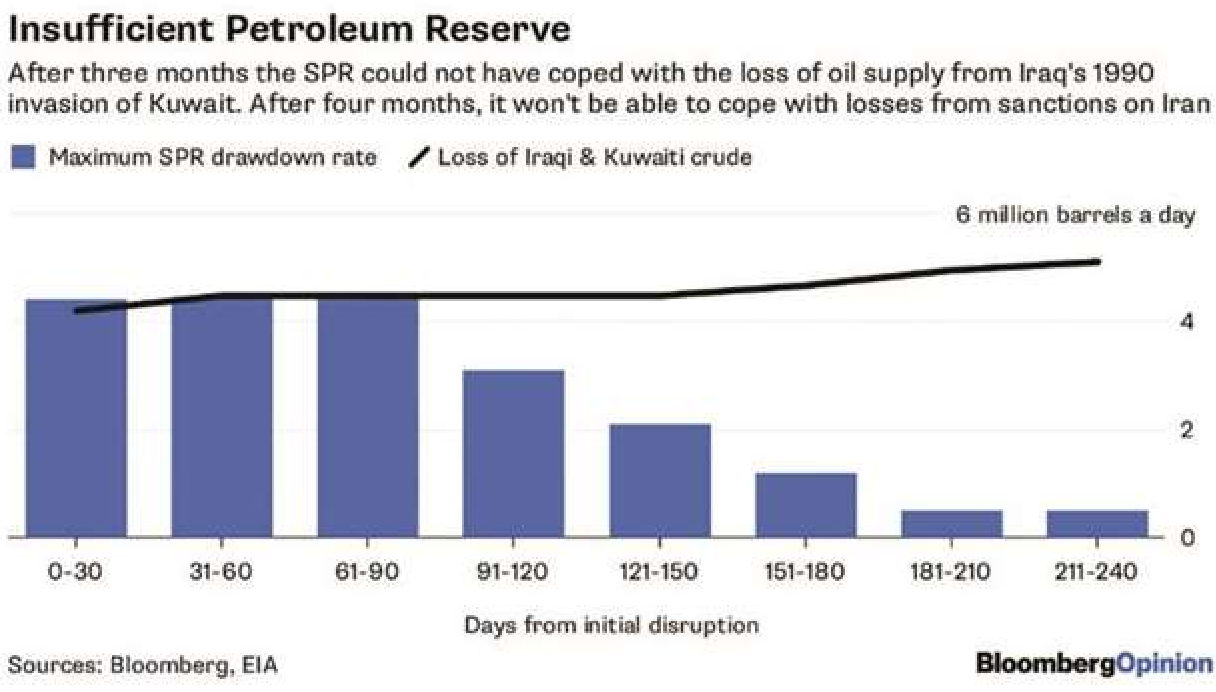
Imagine a world without Opec – it isn't paradise



Imagine a world without Opec. This is what the sponsors of legislation introduced in both houses of Congress seem to want. Versions of the “No Oil Producing and Exporting Countries Act,” or the NOpec bill, are working their way through the Senate and the House of Representatives, and are likely to find much more support from the White House than they have in the past – Presidents George W Bush and Barack Obama both threatened to veto similar legislation.

The bill would allow US antitrust laws to be enforced against Opec members whom the sponsors say have “used production quotas to keep oil prices artificially high.” This is a popular argument in a country where the right to cheap gasoline might have been written into the constitution alongside the right to bear arms, had that document been drafted a couple of hundred years later than it was. But we need to look a bit further than the gas station forecourt. And when we do, we will not be looking upon the promised land.

Opec introduced production quotas in 1982, to allocate output between member countries faced with a third year of falling global oil demand and rising supply from countries like Mexico and India, which left them with as much as 12mn barrels a day of spare capacity. Saudi Arabia had already reduced its oil production by 30% and, just as in 2016, was no longer prepared to shoulder alone the burden of balancing oil supply and demand.

What would have happened if Opec hadn’t got together? Sure, drivers in America and elsewhere would have enjoyed cheaper gasoline for a while. But probably not for too long. Even with the group’s supply management, oil prices reached a low of around $14 a barrel in 1986, according to data from BP Plc.

How much further would they have fallen if member nations had continued to produce without restraint? Certainly low enough to make production uneconomic in Alaska, the Gulf of Mexico, the North Sea, Western Canada and a host of other oil provinces that have become mainstays of non-Opec production. The group’s supply management created the space for 33bn barrels of additional non-Opec production in the 20 years it took for them to get their supply back to the level it had been in 1978.

But nearly 40 years later, the world’s a different place. Here is what would happen if the NOpec bill became law and the group failed to protect itself from its reach. This would be the world without Opec.

There could be no collective action to try to balance oil supply and demand. Saudi Arabia has said repeatedly that it wouldn’t balance the market on its own and support high-cost oil producers.

You don’t have to search too far to see what that means in practice. Just cast your mind back four years, during the thick of Opec’s pump-at-will policy. Oil prices fell to $26 a barrel – great for drivers, but not so good for the US oil patch, or for investment in future production capacity needed to offset natural decline in existing fields.

As Saudi Arabia raised its production, the number of rigs drilling for oil in the US fell by 80%. The only region in the world where drilling didn’t drop was the Middle East. It wasn’t long before there were calls, including from candidate Trump’s energy adviser, for Opec to act to reduce supply and rescue prices that were too low for the American shale industry.

If the NOpec bill becomes law, there’s little incentive for anyone to hold spare production capacity. In recent decades this willingness has been an important safety valve to relieve the pressure of supply disruptions. A study by the King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center, initiated in 2016, assessed the annual economic benefit to the global economy of Opec’s spare production capacity at between $170bn and $200bn through the reduction in price volatility in times of supply disruption. Without that buffer, oil prices could have spiked above $300 a barrel during the Libyan revolution, the study found.

The biggest consumer-held oil stockpile – the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve – could not have coped with the loss of supply that accompanied Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait, and it would have struggled to offset the loss of Libyan production

in 2011 for more than five months. The loss of supply that may result from Trump's revival of sanctions against Iran would exceed the reserve's ability to deliver within four months.
It seems perverse to be attacking President Trump's ally against Iran and the world's only source of spare capacity, while simultaneously initiating the biggest supply disruption in nearly 30 years. But attacking allies and destabilising markets seem to be a favourite pastime in Washington these days.

Yemen's Fleeting Opportunity for Peace

The potential for a breakthrough in the Yemen war, now in its fourth year, may be close at hand. Last week, Martin Griffiths, the new UN envoy to Yemen, delivered a proposal that would avert a fight for Hodeidah, a city of as many as 600,000 people whose port provides an economic lifeline to millions of Yemenis. Now, it is up to the Houthis, the rebel group occupying Hodeidah, along with the internationally recognized government of Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi and the Saudi-led coalition that backs it, to deliver their responses to Griffiths.

If any one of these parties rejects Griffiths's plan—or if Western powers fail to exert enough pressure on their Gulf allies to accept it—they would be complicit in the ensuing tragedy and the perpetuation of a war that has precipitated the world's costliest humanitarian crisis. With UAE-backed forces on the outskirts of Hodeidah and the Houthis digging in for what promises to be a long, nasty fight, these answers could not come soon enough.

While Griffiths's plan has not yet been made public, a broad outline has leaked. The details include a phased Houthi withdrawal from Hodeidah's port and city, along with two other nearby ports. The UN would help Yemeni staff run the port facility, and would also assist local government and police in managing the city. Because these local personnel have remained largely neutral during the war in Yemen, they ought to be acceptable to all sides. In return, UAE-backed forces would gradually pull back from the city. The deal would be tied to a broader national ceasefire, and a return to peace talks after a two-year hiatus.

So far, the parties have hedged. The Houthis have demonstrated some flexibility. They have agreed to hand over the port even as they quibble over control of the city. For its part, the Hadi government has been somewhat positive about the UN proposal—albeit, chiefly because it thinks the Houthis will reject it, not because it feels a need to broker a settlement with them. Indeed, even as they credit their military pressure for the Houthis' newfound willingness to compromise, both the government and the coalition argue that the rebels are not negotiating in good faith. They contend that their foes have continued preparing defenses around Hodeidah, and point to earlier instances when the rebels purportedly reneged on their word. These are legitimate concerns, but the UN proposal nonetheless deserves a chance. Emirati officials have argued repeatedly that the threat to forcibly seize Hodeidah was designed to prompt greater Houthi flexibility. If the coalition can't take yes for an answer now, then what was the point of that threat to begin with?

The coalition has also suggested that even if Griffiths's ideas were endorsed by all, the UN lacks the capacity to carry them out. Yet surely this ought not stand in the way of an agreement that could spare thousands of lives. There is a straightforward remedy: If the UN needs support, it stands to reason that UN member states should provide it.

At times, the UAE and Saudi Arabia behave as if they should be rewarded with a better deal simply for restraining themselves from carrying out their assault. But avoiding a battle for the port is not doing the world a favor—it's living up to a moral and political obligation, and giving themselves a face-saving way to achieve their goals without waging a fight they may not even win.

Griffiths needs help to keep this peace deal on track. He needs much more than the mostly empty, cautious rhetorical backing he's received from Western capitals and UN Security Council members to date. Countries with influence over warring parties face a choice: stick to the verbal acrobatics they have employed thus far and risk becoming complicit in the outcome of their inaction, or put political muscle behind their call for a negotiated settlement. In the case of Iran—which has consistently claimed it can help resolve the conflict—this means holding the Houthis' feet to the fire while pressing them to accept the UN proposals to manage not only the port but also the city.

But responsibility for bringing about a negotiated end to the war lies chiefly with the United States, France, and Britain. All have concrete leverage over the coalition, stemming from their arms sales to the Saudis and the Emiratis; none has been willing to use it. In private, all can be forceful in their concern about an attack on Hodeidah, but in public, they are far more muted. Speaking behind closed doors, U.S. officials worry that a fight for the port and city could be calamitous. In contrast, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's public statements have only promised that the United States is “monitoring” the situation in Hodeidah. This should change, and pressure from Congress on the administration could make that happen.

There are certainly reasons why the anti-Houthi coalition might balk at halting its campaign to take Hodeidah. It has undeniably made military progress in recent months, giving it less incentive to accept Griffiths’s plan. But the coalition has also encountered unexpected resistance in its efforts to seize the port and struggled to maintain its supply lines. While it claims the current pause in its campaign is designed to facilitate diplomacy, it is clearly facing operational problems on the ground. The bottom line is that there can be no clean military victory once the fight reaches the city of Hodeidah. And even if coalition forces succeed there, the Houthis are unlikely to fade away.

The priorities today are clear: first, to get the parties to accept a compromise on Hodeidah, and then to resume negotiations to end the broader conflict. A real, if tenuous, chance exists to achieve both. It would be a missed opportunity and a moral failing if it were squandered.

What post-Brexit UK can learn from the blockade of Qatar

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Next week, the youthful ruler of the tiny Kingdom of Qatar will arrive in London to meet the Prime Minister. His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani’s visit is aimed at promoting Qatar and what it stands for in the face of the year-long blockade by four neighbouring states – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. In doing so, he may have some valuable lessons for Theresa May in her embattled state.
The four countries had become infuriated with Qatar’s growing influence in the region, its support for opposition groups and its ties with Iran. They accused Qatar of harbouring terrorists and made sweeping demands including the closure of its flagship Al-Jazeera Arabic news channel.

In June 2017, a land, air and sea blockade was imposed on the gas-rich state by the four countries without warning. Families with relatives straddling borders were torn apart, institutions cut off from contact in the blockading countries, ships refused passage through Emirati ports and planes banned from flying over neighbouring airspace.
Qatar’s rupture with its neighbours is far more severe than even the hardest Brexit would be for the UK. If Britain crashes out of the EU with no deal, trade and travel will become much more difficult. But that is very different from the imposition of a blockade.

Yet there are lessons from Qatar’s experience for the UK. While there has been an outpouring of national sentiment – Qatari patriotism is on the rise like never before – the policy response has been to seek to make Qatar more open to the world rather than less.

Qatar has therefore lifted visa restrictions, offered permanent residency to parts of its large foreign workforce, and strengthened its commitment to human rights and freedom of speech – although it should be noted that critics maintain it needs to do more.

The tiny gulf Kingdom has made enormous investments in education, science, medicine and cultural institutions, with the goal of becoming an international hub. It has invested in a futuristic education campus, state-of-the-art hospitals, and a new national library and museum. Its goal is to be a more attractive destination.

As the UK considers its place in the world in the face of Brexit, there are some lessons it could draw from Qatar. The UK should become more open, not less; increase investment, not diminish it; and draw on our enormous scientific and intellectual talent, not alienate it.

There are three things the government could immediately do. First, scrap the net migration target and allow more international students to study in the UK – and permit them to contribute to our economy with post-study work visas. Second, increase investment in research so that we match the top quartile of advanced countries (the UK has been falling behind for more than a decade) and increase public investment in innovation. Third, make clear that Britain welcomes talent from all over the world, and is open rather than closed.

The shape of the UK’s deal with the EU is highly uncertain – and it now seems possible that Britain will not leave at all. There appears to be no majority in Parliament for any deal, let alone an ultra-hard Brexit. Yet Britain must now resolve the deeper question about what it takes to succeed in the world in the 21st century.

Distant as the gas rich city state is from the UK culturally,

economically and geographically, Theresa May might draw some comfort from Qatar’s resilience in the face of extraordinary pressure and much-changed regional circumstances. But the real lesson is that no matter the Brexit deal, the UK needs a radical rethink.
Professor Darzi is a surgeon and director of the Institute of Global Health Innovation, Imperial College London and Executive Chair of the World Innovation Summit for Health (WISH), an initiative of the Qatar Foundation.

Russia and Qatar discuss S-400 missile systems deal TASS

(Reuters) – Russia and Qatar have been in discussions about a possible sale of S-400 missile systems to Doha, TASS news agency cited the Russian envoy to Qatar as saying on Saturday.

He also confirmed media reports that Qatar and Russia had signed a deal on supplying Qatar with small arms, such as Kalashnikov assault rifles, and anti-tank weapons.

“As far as the air defense is concerned, the S-400 systems and so on, there are talks about this, but there is no concrete conclusion,” Nurmakhmad Kholov, the ambassador to Qatar, was quoted as saying.

Kholov also told TASS the Qatari Energy Minister Mohammed al-Sada will take part in Moscow’s energy conference in October.