Le pétrole baisse, Russie et Arabie saoudite discutent d'une hausse de la production

Londres (awp/afp) – Les prix du pétrole reculaient nettement vendredi en cours d'échanges européens alors que la Russie et l'Arabie saoudite envisagent désormais d'augmenter les seuils de production de l'accord qui les engage, selon des déclarations des ministres de l'Energie des deux pays.

Vers 10H00 GMT (12H00 HEC), le baril de Brent de la mer du Nord pour livraison en juillet valait 77,19 dollars sur l'Intercontinental Exchange (ICE) de Londres, en baisse de 1,60 dollar par rapport à la clôture de jeudi.

Dans les échanges électroniques sur le New York Mercantile Exchange (Nymex), le baril de "light sweet crude" (WTI) pour la même échéance perdait 1,35 dollar à 69,36 dollars.

Face à la hausse marquée des prix ces derniers mois, l'Organisation des pays exportateurs de pétrole (Opep) et ses partenaires pourraient assouplir leur accord de limitation de la production, ce qui pèse sur les prix vendredi.

Les deux meneurs de cet accord, le ministre russe de l’Energie Alexandre Novak et son homologue saoudien Khaled al-Faleh se sont rencontrés jeudi soir à Saint-Petersbourg et ils envisagent désormais d’augmenter les seuils de production.

“Il est probable qu’il y ait une remontée progressive de la production au deuxième semestre”, a affirmé vendredi le ministre saoudien, selon des propos rapportés par l’agence Bloomberg.

L’Arabie saoudite, premier exportateur mondial, est particulièrement observée par les marchés alors que l’offre mondiale est entravée par les baisses de production au Venezuela et pourrait l’être encore plus par les sanctions américaines contre ce pays et contre l’Iran.

“Le déclin de la production de l’Opep nous pousse à penser que les réserves mondiales vont décliner au deuxième et au troisième trimestre 2018”, ont jugé les analystes de Société Générale, qui ont revu à la hausse leurs prévisions de prix pour le Brent, à 80 dollars au troisième trimestre.

L’avenir de l’accord de limitation de la production devrait être au coeur de la prochaine réunion de l’Opep et de ses partenaires, fin juin à Vienne.

Le ministre saoudien a affirmé qu’il rencontrerait ses homologues de l’Opep, et qu’il aurait l’occasion de se réunir avec M. Novak une ou deux fois avant la réunion de Vienne.

L’Arabie saoudite et la Russie sont deux des trois plus grands producteurs de pétrole au monde, avec les Etats-Unis.

“L’Arabie saoudite veut garder les prix sous contrôle mais éviter qu’ils plongent complètement”, a résumé Oliver Jakob, analyste chez Petromatrix, qui estime que l’Opep pourrait augmenter sa production de 500.000 barils par jour (alors que l’accord prévoit une baisse de 1,8 million de barils par jour).

The Europeans: Gas War is Behind Washington Quitting the Iranian Nuclear Deal

“It is clear that the upcoming investments will not happen, I do not know which of the major international companies will risk it,” he predicted in an interview with Agence France-Presse.
Washington, ignoring the Europeans’ warnings that it would re-impose the sanctions imposed under the multilateral agreement in 2015, has been back on Iran in return for a pledge to freeze its nuclear program.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned that European companies, which would continue to deal with Iran in sectors banned under US sanctions, would “be held responsible.”

The United States launched a strategy to search for markets to sell its natural gas and exported 17.2 billion cubic meters in 2017 to EU ports.

According to EHSMarket, the total capacity to import natural gas in Europe will increase by 20% by 2020.

Lower gas on horizon as Gazprom agrees to market approach

Millions of consumers and industries could stand to win after the world's biggest natural gas exporter agreed to match prices in central and eastern Europe with markets in the west.
As part of an accord to settle a seven-year-old antitrust case with European regulators, Gazprom agreed to remove restrictions on pipeline flows, and give customers the right to resell, swap and check their rates against markets in the Netherlands and Germany.
The agreement brings customers in the east more in line with the conditions western utilities from RWE to Eni have sought from Gazprom through negotiations or via the courts.
"I expect to see lower gas prices in southeast Europe as Gazprom brings them closer to those paid by the buyers in western Europe," said Elchin Mammadov, a utilities analyst at Bloomberg Intelligence in London.

The settlement will speed up the transformation of how Gazprom runs its business in Europe, said Simone Tagliapietra, analyst at the Bruegel think-tank in Brussels. “Gazprom is aware that the European gas market is changing,” she said. “They are simply adapting to the new market conditions.”

The agreement is more effective than immediately slapping Russia’s state-run export monopoly with a fine because it includes binding pledges to enable the free flow of gas at competitive prices in Central and Eastern Europe, the European Commission said on Thursday.

“These obligations will significantly change the way Gazprom operates in central and eastern Europe to the benefit of millions of European consumers when they heat their houses, when they cook their food and to the benefit of European businesses who rely on gas for their production,” EU Competition Commissioner Margrethe Vestager told reporters in Brussels on Thursday.

Because of Gazprom’s “monopolistic” position in eastern Europe, it’s those nations that will benefit the most from the agreement and help cut prices, said Geoffroy Hureau, the secretary-general of Cedigaz, a Paris-based industry research group. Meanwhile, the company’s biggest client in Europe is just happy that the case is coming to an end.

“These things dragged on for too long – they are a burden to discussions on other topics,” Uniper’s chief executive officer Klaus Schaefer said in an interview in St Petersburg. “Therefore to get clarity on this in due course is important.”

Uniper was spun off from EON SE two years ago. EON was among the first utilities to seek more flexible terms from Gazprom back in 2009. The financial crisis had damped demand for the fuel and made market rates, which utilities use to sell the fuel to their own clients, cheaper than fuel from Gazprom.

The settlement comes as Russia faces UK accusations it poisoned a double agent that sparked the largest collective expulsion of Russian intelligence officers. Still, a thaw in relations with Europe – an opportunity for rapprochement – came this month when the US pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal, angering other world powers. The EU's antitrust case has been a thorn in Gazprom's side since regulators conducted raids in 2011. But geopolitics crept into the antitrust case from the start after Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree in 2012 that gave the government the right to protect Gazprom from EU inquiries, but the commission stuck with its case.

Customers that bought gas originally for delivery to Hungary, Poland or Slovakia, can choose to have Gazprom deliver all or part of it to Bulgaria or the Baltic States instead and vice versa against a fee, the EU said.

But despite the outlook for better deals in the region, Poland's Deputy Foreign Minister Konrad Szymanski told state newswire PAP he was disappointed that there were no penalties or compensation for years of higher prices than their western competitors. Lithuania doesn't rule out appealing the decision of the European Commission not to fine Gazprom, Interfax reported, citing Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis. "I know that some would have liked to see us fine Gazprom instead, no matter the solution on the table," Vestager told reporters. "But a fine would not have achieved all of our competition objectives." The Commissioner also underlined that if Gazprom breaks any of these obligations, it can impose a fine of as much as 10% of the company's worldwide sales, without having to prove an infringement of EU antitrust rules. The EU obligations will be in place for eight years. "It is the enforcement of the Gazprom obligations that begins today," Vestager said.

Deputy chief executive officer Alexander Medvedev said that Gazprom is "satisfied" with the settlement.

"We were always committed to cooperate in good faith in order to find a constructive, mutually acceptable solution in accordance with the established procedure," he said in a statement.

"We believe that today's decision is the most reasonable outcome for the well-functioning of the entire European gas market."

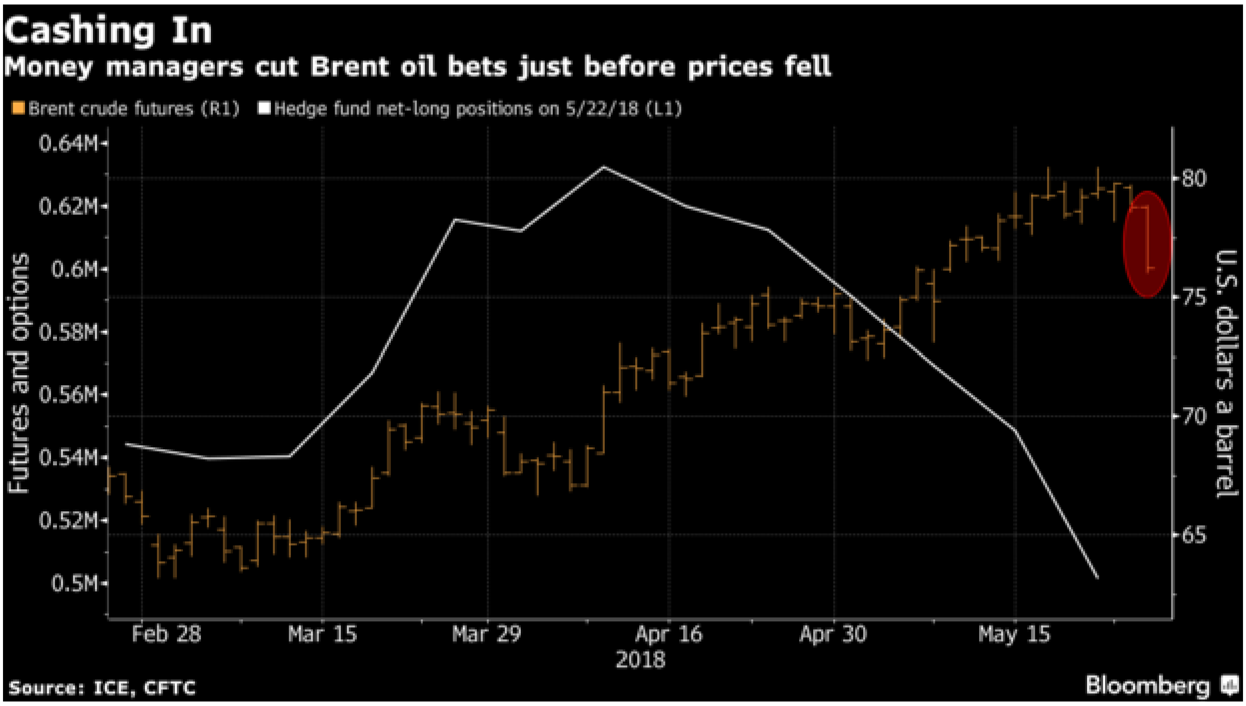
Oil Drop Below $80 Vindicates Cautious Investors Trimming Bets

- Hedge funds cut Brent wagers by most since June 2017
- Saudi Arabia signals OPEC and allies may boost production

Money managers' reluctance to get behind the oil rally is finally paying off.

Hedge funds trimmed their net-long position — the difference between bets on a price increase and wagers on a drop — in Brent crude by the most in almost a year. The cuts came as the global benchmark capped its first weekly drop since early April, sliding below $80 a barrel after Saudi Arabia and Russia said OPEC and its allies may boost oil output in the second half of the year.

“Traders thought that the market was in the process of topping out,” John Kilduff, a partner at Again Capital LLC, a New York-based hedge fund, said by telephone Friday. Oil prices had a “swift reaction today to the musings by OPEC to potentially add more supply to the market. We will be very headline-driven over the next few weeks.”



Oil retreated from the highest prices in almost four years as Russian and Saudi energy ministers signaled that the coalition led by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries may gradually raise oil production to assuage consumer anxiety about higher prices. Their comments mark a major shift in strategy for the historic alliance forged in 2016 to erase a global crude glut.

“I think in the near future there will be time to release supply" smoothly to avoid shocking the market, Saudi Energy Minister Khalid Al-Falih said at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in Russia. When OPEC, Russia and other major producers meet in June "we will do what is necessary" to reassure buyers, the minister said.

He spoke after talks with his Russian counterpart Alexander Novak, who said the output boost would start in the third quarter, if it's approved by other members of the group. Both men said the size of the increase was still subject to negotiation.

Hedge funds lowered their Brent net-long position by 8.6 percent in the week ended May 22 to 501,634 contracts, according to ICE Futures Europe data on futures and options released Friday. That was the biggest decline since June 2017.

Money managers' net-long position in West Texas Intermediate crude fell by 2 percent to 377,520 futures and options, the lowest since November, according to U.S. Commodity Futures Trading Commission released Friday. Longs slipped less than 0.1 percent, while shorts climbed 23 percent, the biggest jump since April.

"You want to get out of the long positions if you are expecting that OPEC is going to increase production," James Williams, president of London, Arkansas-based energy researcher WTRG Economics, said by phone. "It makes perfect sense for the folks that are long to say, 'How much longer can this thing continue to grow?'"

Disruption Threat

Crude had rallied earlier this month on the dual threat of supply disruptions from Iran and Venezuela, which together account for about 14 percent of OPEC's production. Still, the coalition is weighing the possibility of easing output limits at a time when drillers are pumping record amounts of crude from American shale basins.

“The market kind of overextended itself, ” Gene McGillian, manager of market research for Tradition Energy in Stamford, Connecticut, said by phone. “With the Saudis now saying they’re limiting their production cuts and geopolitical risk already priced in, there is going to be some uncertainty.”

A dearth of pipelines in West Texas’ Permian Basin, the most prolific U.S. oil play, is leaving supplies trapped in the region. That’s expanding the nation’s surplus of the fuel as American production tops 10 million barrels a day.

U.S. inventories climbed by 5.78 million barrels to about 438 million barrels in the week ended May 18, data from the Energy Information Administration showed. That was a surprise increase compared with the 2 million-barrel decline predicted in a Bloomberg survey.

But analysts and traders predict that stockpiles may decline in the coming weeks, bolstering prices. Data provider Genscape Inc. was said to report that inventories fell by about 475,000 barrels between May 18 and May 22 at the key pipeline hub in Cushing, Oklahoma.

Oil prices have “been extremely extended for a long period of time,” Kyle Cooper, a consultant at brokerage Ion Energy Group LLC, said by phone Friday. The “EIA report was bearish with a nearly 6 million-barrel build in total petroleum. The more important thing is how that was followed up today with OPEC and Russia regarding the possibility of removing some of those supply constraints.”

Saudi Arabia and Russia Discuss Scaling Back Global Oil Cuts

- Easing output curbs “on the table”; no decision yet: Al-Falih
- OPEC, allies to discuss loosening supply caps in June: Novak

Saudi Arabia and Russia, the oil producers who led the effort to shrink a global glut, said they are discussing easing output curbs for the first time.30

While scaling back the supply caps is “on the table,” no decision has been made, Saudi Arabian Energy Minister Khalid Al-Falih said in an interview early Friday morning in St. Petersburg. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and its partners will in June discuss loosening the curbs that began in 2017, Russian counterpart Alexander Novak said at the same interview after a meeting between the two officials.

Speculation is swirling over when and by how much the producers will scale back cuts after they eliminated an inventory surplus that had sparked a price crash about four years ago. Market uncertainty has risen following renewed U.S. sanctions on Iran that may curb the Islamic Republic’s exports, and as economic turmoil in Venezuela drives a collapse of the OPEC member’s oil industry. Crude’s rebound is also spurring concern that demand may falter.

Russia and Saudi Arabia share a common view on “consuming countries’ anxiety and concerns over potential supply shortages,” Al-Falih said. “We will ensure that the market remains in its trajectory towards rebalancing, but at the same time we will not overcorrect.” The two nations will meet at least two more times before OPEC and its partners gather in Vienna next month, he said.

While Saudi Arabia has shown a desire for higher prices to bankroll domestic economic reforms and underpin the valuation of its state oil company in a planned initial public offering, the top OPEC member and its allies are facing pressure from consuming nations as well as crude producing companies.

High Enough

Indian Petroleum Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said earlier this month that he expressed concern about rising crude and its impact on consumers to Al-Falih. He added that the Saudi energy minister had assured him that the Middle East nation and other producers would ensure that adequate supplies are available and that prices remain reasonable. In developing countries from Brazil to the Philippines, drivers are complaining about high fuel costs.

In Russia, some of the largest oil producers called for more flexibility after almost 17 months of output curbs. The cuts have achieved their goal and crude prices near $80 a barrel are high enough, according to the bosses of Lukoil PJSC and Gazprom Neft PJSC. Novak said that he will hold talks with the nation’s crude producers next week or the week after to discuss the deal with OPEC.

“Earlier we said that we will monitor the market situation, now we can say that we are looking into the issue” of a smooth recovery in output to meet growing demand, Novak said in the interview on Friday. He added that he and Al-Falih discussed prices and the market situation, including Venezuelan production and risks related to Iran.

The Saudi minister said he'll meet Novak again in Moscow on June 14, adding that another meeting between the two is possible before that.

U.S. Supply

In Washington, Democrats are using high gasoline prices, approaching $3 a gallon for the first time since 2014, as a political tool, accusing the White House of not doing enough to shield consumers.

Recent price gains have been driven by American actions such as President Donald Trump's withdrawal from a 2015 deal between Iran and world powers that had eased sanctions on the Persian Gulf state in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program. Earlier this month, Al-Falih and United Arab Emirates Energy Minister Suhail Al Mazrouei said recent moves in oil prices have been driven by geopolitics and that global supply remains ample.

Additionally, record production in the U.S., which is not part of the deal among global producers to cut output, is a key issue that's complicating strategy for OPEC and its allies.

Brent crude, the benchmark for more than half the world's oil, was down 0.4 percent at $78.49 a barrel at 7:31 a.m. in London. Earlier this month, prices had traded above $80 a barrel for the first time since November 2014. U.S. West Texas Intermediate futures were at $70.49 a barrel in New York.

"We will be coordinating closely, monitoring the market almost on a daily basis," Al-Falih said on Friday. "We'll consult with other countries. Each of them has a voice and their voices matter to us."

‘Gulf crisis threatens E Africa peace efforts’

Diplomatic tensions between countries in the Gulf are threatening peace efforts in East Africa, particularly in the Horn of Africa, the EU’s special envoy has warned.

The crisis, which erupted nearly a year ago, has pitted Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain against Qatar, with Riyadh and its allies accusing Doha of fostering close ties with Iran and backing Islamic extremists. Qatar has denied all the allegations and the accusers have failed to submit any evidence to support their claims.

But the fallout has had direct repercussions in the Horn of Africa where it has exacerbated already-existing tensions, notably in Somalia, said Alexander Rondos, Europe’s special envoy to the region.

In particular, tensions have escalated steadily between Somalia and the United Arab Emirates, which has sought to extend its influence there as the war in Yemen rages on.

Although the two countries have been traditionally close, Mogadishu’s attempts to remain neutral over the Gulf divisions have not gone down well.

One of the EU’s “most important objectives” is to make sure that East Africa “is as well protected as it can be from what is a rapidly shifting geopolitical environment” in the Gulf, he said on Friday following a two-day seminar of EU envoys to

the region.
Political strife between Gulf states and their alliances with east African players was “the biggest strategic issue because it could easily undermine all of the efforts to overcome East Africa’s own particular crises, whether it’s South Sudan or Somalia,” Rondos said.

Sanctions aren’t stopping Russia’s LNG ambitions

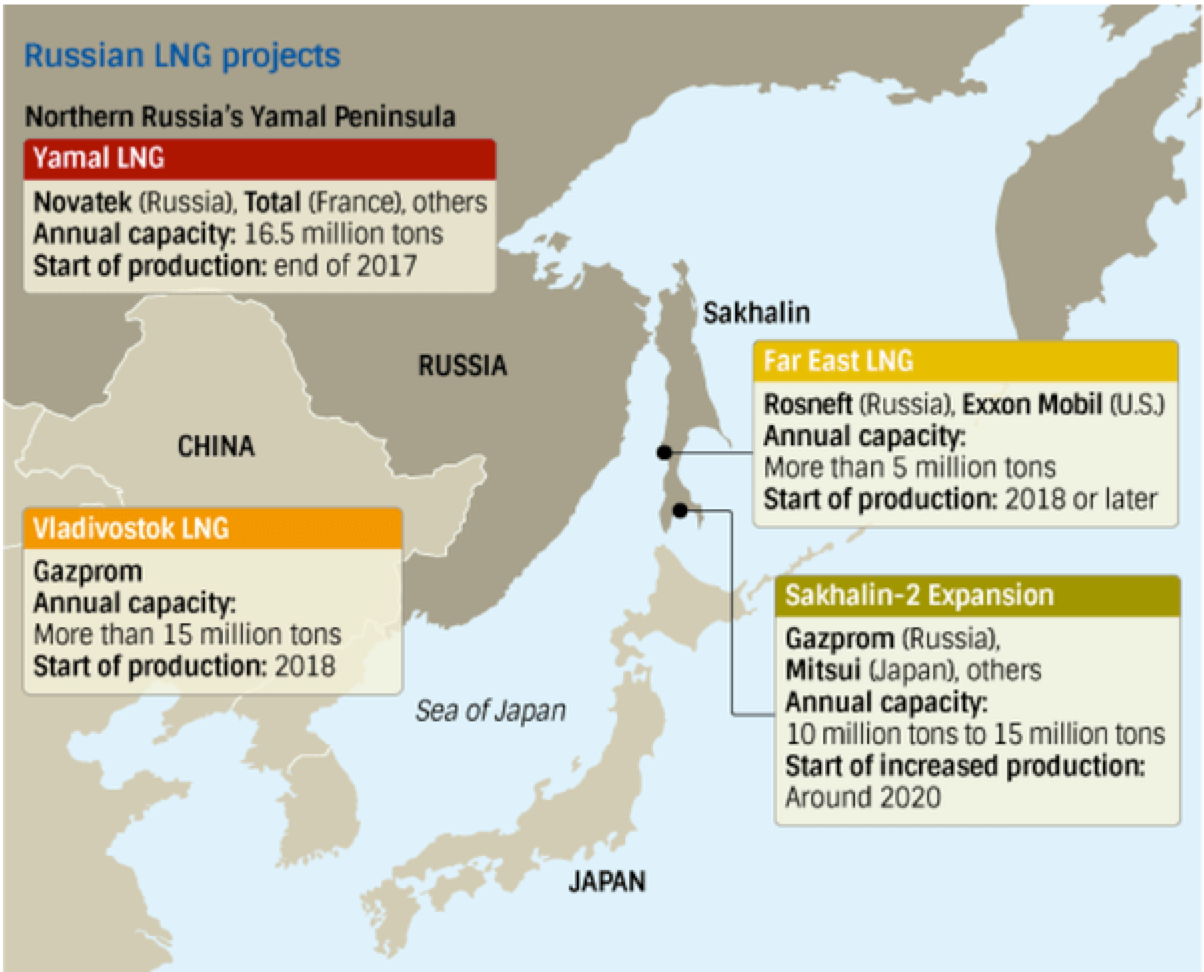
Despite the imposition of US and EU sanctions in the energy sector, new projects continue to flourish in Russia. Already the world’s largest exporter of traditional natural gas, the country is gaining a foothold in the liquefied natural gas market. For the last 3 years, Russia’s LNG capacity has been growing substantially.

Competition from Qatar, Australia, and the US, the world leaders in LNG exports, coupled with the impact of political tensions after the Ukraine crisis, have made Russia reconsider its traditional pipeline exports. After Lithuania and Poland built their own LNG terminals with gas from Norway, Qatar and most recently the US, Gazprom's conventional gas intake was significantly diminished in both countries. Despite Gazprom's cheaper price, Lithuania and Poland preferred to pay a premium for their LNG to reduce the dependency on Russia's energy resources.

Gaining a foothold
Novatek, Rosneft and Gazprom each set out to develop their own unconventional gas resources. Novatek's Yamal LNG is Russia's most ambitious project. Based on the Kara Sea in the Arctic Circle, gas extraction is conducted under the permafrost, which makes it incredibly challenging. Funded by Russia's Novatek, France's Total, China National Petroleum Corporation, and China's Silk Road Fund, Yamal LNG is a $27 billion facility that will start full operation in 2018. It will produce 16.5 million tonnes of LNG per year. Yamal LNG's gas plant will be finished in November. As a symbolic gesture, Russia will send the first shipments to China, which supported the project. Another four shipments will follow in December.

Rosneft is developing its Far East LNG project in Sakhalin, which aims to produce 5 million tonnes of LNG gas. Its goal is to deliver supplies to the Asia-Pacific region, in particular to Japan and South Korea.

Gazprom is pushing LNG as in-house transport fuels. Russia's gas giant signed agreements with Avtodor, the Russian highways state company, and Gazprom Gazomotornoye Toplivo, a Gazprom subsidiary, to grow a network of LNG and compressed natural gas filling stations for locomotives and trucks. Expanding its reach, Gazprom also launched small-scale LNG projects abroad in places like Vietnam, Belarus, Ghana and Bolivia.



Bypassing Western sanctions

The impact of Western sanctions on Russia's LNG development proved to be rather limited. Despite the restrictions on financial borrowing and export of Western technologies (e.g. drilling and hydraulic fracturing), Russia managed to keep its LNG projects afloat. Loopholes in the sanctions regime and new partners allowed Russia to bypass legal implications and to find new funding.

While both oil and gas exploration projects were prohibited under US sanctions, the EU sanctions exempted gas projects. This allowed European investors to further participate in the development of Russia's LNG gas plants. Both French Total and Dutch Shell preserved their 20% and 27% shares in the Yamal and Sakhalin projects, respectively.

Despite Western restrictions on capital, Russian energy companies still manage to attract European investments. Italy's Saipem is set to be a subcontractor for Arctic LNG 2, Novatek's second gas plant on the Kara Sea. In 2015, Shell agreed to invest in the expansion of Gazprom's Sakhalin II, while in 2017, a Dutch company set up a joint venture with Gazprom to design and construct the Baltic LNG project in the Leningrad Region. However, Rosneft's Far East and Gazprom's Vladivostok LNG projects were delayed until 2020 due to a lack of funds and low fuel prices. Partnered with ExxonMobil in 2014, the Far East project was stalled due to looming Western sanctions over the Ukraine crisis. Recently, Rosneft announced that it may build the LNG plant using its own resources exclusively.

Russia's pivot to Asia and the Middle East lessened the country's dependence on Western lending. In March 2017, having difficulties raising funds from Western banks, Novatek sold a 9.9% stake to China's Silk Road Fund. Similarly, Rosneft turned to Chinese investors after Glencore and the Qatar Investment Authority cut their stakes. A 14% stake of Rosneft was bought by CEFC, China's Energy conglomerate, for $9 billion. Recently, investors from Japan and the Middle East showed interest in Gazprom's Baltic and Novatek's Arctic 2 LNG projects.

Making strides in the LNG market

With the latest reports predicting 13% growth in the LNG market by 2025 and an overall 53% share in long-distance gas trade by 2040, Russia is under further pressure to develop its LNG projects on time. Currently, Russia exports 10.8 million tonnes and has a 4.2% market share.

Following the completion of the Arctic 2 LNG project, the country might challenge the dominance of Qatar, which currently occupies 30% of the market. By building the second gas plant on the Gydan peninsula, Russia could produce up to 70 million tonnes of LNG annually, just below Qatar's 77 million. The construction of Arctic 2 is slated to commence in

2019, with the first shipments due on the market in 2023.

Challenging Qatar's dominance in the LNG market would make Russia not only the world's largest exporter of conventional natural gas, but also of liquefied gas. The conditions for that are favourable. With funding from China and Saudi Arabia, Russia can bypass Western restrictions on capital. Russia's LNG exploration sites are strategically close to the Asian market. Located in the Far East, LNG would be easy to transport via sea to Japan and South Korea, the world's largest LNG importers.

EU settles seven-year Gazprom dispute without imposing fine

The EU has settled a seven-year dispute with Gazprom after the Russian state-controlled energy giant agreed to change its operations in central and eastern Europe.

The deal, announced on Thursday by the EU's competition commissioner, Margrethe Vestager, comes at a time of tensions between Russia and Europe over Ukraine, Syria and the poisoning of the Skripals in Salisbury, which has taken British-Russian relations to a new low. Meanwhile there is division within the EU over the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline between Russia and Germany.

Vestager sought to isolate the case from the political turmoil. "This case is not about Russia, this case is about European consumers and European businesses and making the market serve them," she said. "This is about what rules to play by, no matter your flag, no matter your ownership."

Under the terms of the deal, Gazprom will be banned from imposing restrictions on how its customers in central and eastern Europe use gas. Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia will no longer be banned from exporting gas to another country.

The deal aims to answer concerns that customers in five countries were being over-charged for their gas. From now on, customers in Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have the right to demand a price in line with those in Germany and the Netherlands.

If Gazprom fails to respond, these customers can take their complaint to an arbitration body in the EU, which is empowered to impose a lower price.

Some governments are unhappy about the commission's decision not to fine Gazprom for its past behaviour. Lithuania's prime minister, Saulius Skvernelis, described the proposed settlement as "strange", Reuters reported.

Acknowledging that some would have liked to have seen Gazprom fined, Vestager said that option was not in the best interests of European consumers.

“With today’s decision, Gazprom has accepted that it has to play by our common European rules, at least if it wants to sell its gas in Europe. It has accepted to play by a rulebook that is tailor-made to ensure that European customers can benefit from the free flow of gas this very day.”

She said failure to comply could lead to a fine of up to 10% of global turnover, a step that can be taken without another lengthy legal investigation.

“This is not empty theory,” she said. “In 2013 we fined Microsoft over half a billion euros when the company broke its obligation. In other words, the case doesn’t stop with today’s decision. Rather, it is the enforcement of the Gazprom obligations that starts today.”

Gazprom’s deputy chief executive, Alexander Medvedev, said he was satisfied with the settlement, describing it as “the most reasonable outcome for the well-functioning of the entire European gas market”.

Europe Awakens for LNG to Rival China as Own Gas Runs Out

Europe is starting to steal some of the limelight from China’s booming liquefied natural gas demand as imports pick up after several lackluster years.

Europe and China will be comparable in significance as importing regions in the coming years, Cheniere Energy Inc. said, citing data from Wood Mackenzie Ltd. That follows “absolutely phenomenal” growth in China last year, Andrew Walker, vice president for strategy at the company that pioneered the transformation of the U.S. shale boom into global exports, said in Amsterdam.

China’s LNG consumption leapt 42 percent last year to almost match European imports, which climbed 20 percent. Whereas the Asian nation needs the fuel mostly to replace dirtier coal, Europe needs it to offset rapidly declining domestic production.

The re-emergence of Europe as an LNG market has caught the eye of the coming wave of U.S. fuel producers. Venture Global LNG, Inc., which is developing export terminals in Louisiana, sees Europe as “one of the biggest surprises,” it said at the Flame conference in Amsterdam.

Europe’s location may give it an edge over generally higher-

priced markets in Asia when it comes to attracting the increasing volumes produced in the Atlantic. North America and Russia were seen providing most of the new supply from 2025 to 2030, according to a poll at Flame.
Demand growth in China and South Korea, the second and third biggest LNG importers, will cool during the rest of this year after continued expansion through April, according to Cedigaz, a Paris-based industry research group. With less appetite also from Japan, the biggest buyer, northern Europe will step in to balance the markets, Cedigaz's secretary general Geoffroy Hureau said at Flame.

U.K. supply this summer may be low but the Netherlands will see a pick up as it rushes to offset lower own production and higher demand for storage, Nick Boyes, a senior gas and LNG analyst at Axpo Trading AG, said by email. France will also need more for storage, he said.

The Netherlands is taking the lead also because of lack of storage demand in Britain after the closure of the Rough facility. The Dutch market is so hot that the country's Title Transfer Facility hub will be the main reference for LNG trading in the next three to four months, Ruben Tomas, lead LNG trader at Germany's Uniper SE's commodity unit, said on a panel.

"We see a well-supplied Atlantic Basin this summer" as Russia's Yamal LNG and U.S. projects fill the market with cargoes, Axpo's Boyes said. Trinidad & Tobago and Angola are also boosting supply, while demand in southern Europe and Egypt is declining, he said.

While the usage rate of LNG terminals in Europe was just 23 percent last year, things are looking up, according to Arturo Gallego Diaz, head of LNG trading and operations at Centrica Plc.

"There are more and more people looking at northwest Europe as an opportunity to deliver volumes that are produced in the

Atlantic basin,” he said.

Declining production in the North Sea and the Dutch Groningen field as well as the closing of coal plants in Europe have a “big impact on LNG production” and are “a very big demand surprise,” Venture Global LNG Chief Commercial Officer Tom Earl said at Flame. The company recently signed a supply contract with Portugal’s Galp Energia SGPS SA.

‘Fairly Stable’

Creditworthy counterparts, liquid hubs and physical demand help make Europe attractive for LNG, according to Gallego Diaz.

Uniper expects “fairly stable” demand for gas in Europe, while seeing growth in gas-to-power and potentially transport, said Gregor Pett, executive vice president for market analytics.

Russia, Europe’s biggest gas supplier, sees higher demand for its pipeline gas, undermining the region’s efforts at diversification, according to Sergei Komlev, head of the contract structuring and price formation directorate at Gazprom PJSC’s export unit.

While Russia will continue to pipe natural gas to Europe in competition with LNG, both can co-exist, the Centrica and Uniper executives said.

“I don’t think they exclude each other,” Uniper’s Pett said. “Everyone has a place.”

Higher oil prices offer ‘temporary relief’ to Mena exporters: IIF

Higher oil prices offer “temporary” relief to the oil exporters of the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) whose economic prospects are improving, according to the Institute of International Finance (IIF), the Washington-based economic think tank.

Oil prices rose rapidly in the past six months on unanticipated sharp output fall in Venezuela, the extension of the producers’ pact on production cuts to the 2018- end, the escalation of tensions in the Mena, which enhanced risks of oil supply disruption; and higher global oil demand. We have revised upward our average Brent oil price assumption to $72 per barrel for 2018 (33% increase form 2017),” IIF said.

With the projected $18 increase in average oil prices in 2018 against last year, it expects the cumulative current account surplus for the nine Mena oil exporters (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Algeria, Iraq and Iran) to increase from $56bn in 2017 to $233bn (9.5% of gross domestic product) in 2018. “The fiscal situation for Mena oil exporters (except Bahrain and Oman) is now on firmer footing. The respective authorities in the region have implemented serious fiscal adjustment in recent years,” it said.

Higher oil prices, combined with additional non-hydrocarbon revenue, should more than offset the 7% average increase in public spending, leading to narrower deficits (excluding investment income), according to the IIF. “We expect the consolidated fiscal deficit for the nine Mena oil exporters to decrease from 7.5% of GDP in 2017 to 3% in 2018,” it said, adding when included investment incomes, which are very large in Kuwait, the UAE and Qatar, the cumulative deficit will be much smaller.

Highlighting that gross public foreign assets will resume its rise to $2.9trn by end-2018; it said about 70% of these assets are in the form of sovereign wealth funds. With relatively little public external debt, the region’s net public external assets position of $2.6bn (108% of GDP) is substantial, the report added. Expecting non hydrocarbon growth to accelerate from 2.3% in 2017 to 2.8% in 2018 (still well below the average growth of 6.2% in 2001-2014); IIF said the growth pickup will be supported by the shift to fiscal expansion following three years of consolidation. A tighter monetary stance in the six GCC countries and Iraq, whose currencies are pegged to the US dollar, could offset some of the gains from expansionary fiscal stances. “We expect a cumulative increase of 100 bps in key policy rates, in line with the four Fed hikes of 25 bps each,” it said.