Norway divestment affects wide array of oil explorers

Selling Out

These are the 10 largest shareholdings affected by Norway's decision

Company	Value of Holding	Percentage Stake	Country
EOG Resources Inc	$488m	1.0	United States
Reliance Industries Ltd	485	0.5	India
Occidental Petroleum Corp	456	1.0	United States
Valero Energy Corp	336	1.1	United States
CNOOC Ltd	330	0.5	China
Woodside Petroleum Ltd	288	1.4	Australia
Canadian Natural Resources Ltd	278	1.0	Canada
Anadarko Petroleum Corp	238	1.1	United States
PTT PCL	216	0.5	Thailand
Concho Resources Inc	182	0.8	United States

Source: Norges Bank

Bloomberg

The decision by the world's biggest sovereign wealth fund to sell some of its energy holdings encompasses a vast array of companies, from US shale drillers and developers of Canadian oil sands, to off shore drillers from Africa to China. Norway's $1tn investment fund said on Friday that it will gradually sell its holdings in oil and gas exploration and production companies in order to reduce the country's exposure to a permanent decline in crude prices. That's a smaller step than the full fossil-fuel divestment that some were proposing, but still aff ects some of the industry's most famous names. Houston-based shale driller EOG Resources Inc is the biggest shareholding to be sold, with a total value $488mn, or just under 1% of the company, according to the fund's website. Indian petroleum and chemicals giant Reliance Industries Ltd is the next largest, with a stake of 0.5% worth $485mn. Other notable US names include Anadarko Petroleum Corp, Apache Corp and Occidental Petroleum Corp On the other side of the Atlantic, explorers Tullow Oil Plc and Premier Oil Plc are aff ected. All of them appear on a list of 134 companies placed in the exploration and production category FTSE Russell. The stocks will be “phased out from the fund gradually over time,” according to Norway’s finance ministry, which may prevent the sale causing any big changes in these companies’ market values. But the move also raises questions about the industry’s appeal to investors in the very long term. “The Norwegian sovereign wealth fund is seen as something of a poster-child amongst sovereign wealth funds,” said Alejandro DeMichelis, director of oil and gas research at Hannam & Partners LLP. “This decision could also trigger other large investors to review their stance toward investing in the oil and gas sector.” Life is changing for oil companies. Ten years ago, they accounted for about 15% of the S&P 500 index. Today, they make up just 5%, having been mostly displaced by technology giants such as Facebook Inc and Apple Inc. Driving this shift is a smorgasbord of new energy sources that’s bringing unprecedented competition for capital. Consumer choices are set to drift farther from the hydrocarbons of the 20th century, with renewables potentially meeting about a quarter of demand by 2040, according to oil major BP Plc. It’s no surprise, then, that investors are increasingly questioning the wisdom of betting on oil. A divestment campaign started by activist group 350.org in 2012 has already persuaded funds holding $8tn to back away from fossil fuels, according to its website. Scrutiny could intensify as AGM season approaches. Catherine Howarth, chief executive off icer of ShareAction – a group that has targeted Royal Dutch Shell Plc in the past – said she expects a “ramp-up” of pressure at annual general meetings that start in the spring.

Venezuela told to pay Conoco $8.75bn over oil seizures

ConocoPhillips was awarded $8.75bn by the World Bank’s arbitration tribunal in re- sponse to Venezuela’s seizure of oil assets more than a decade ago. The Washington-based International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes published a report Friday upholding Conoco’s claim that Venezuela unlawfully confi scated its Hamaca and Petrozuata heavy crude oil projects in the Orinoco River basin in 2007, and said the Houston-based company must be compensated accordingly. The award comes as the US tries to ratchet up pressure on the administration of President Nico- las Maduro after sanctioning state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela SA and recognising Juan Guaido as the nation’s interim leader. Venezuela’s economy has been in turmoil as oil exports continue to crash. Residents of Caracas and other cit- ies on Friday endured a second day without power while Maduro blamed “US imperialism.” “We welcome the ICSID tribunal’s decision, which upholds the principle that governments cannot unlawfully expropriate private invest- ments without paying compensation,” Conoco General Counsel Kelly B Rose said in a statement. Venezuela’s information ministry didn’t immedi- ately respond to requests for comment. Conoco was also awarded $2bn last year by the International Chamber of Commerce over the seizure of assets. Following that decision, the company moved aggressively to take over PDVSA facilities in the Caribbean islands of Bonaire, Cu- racao, St Eustatius and Aruba. Vessels carrying Venezuelan crude were or- dered to immediately pull away from Caribbean ports, creating a backlog of ships and hindering the nation’s oil exports. In August, Conoco reached a settlement with PDVSA under which the company agreed to pay the $2bn back in quarterly instalments over four- and-a-half years. Conoco said in January it had received about a quarter of what’s owed. Some of the payment had been made in crude. Conoco also said at the time it expected to get another pay- ment in February, despite US sanctions. “Given the size of the award and current adverse situation in Venezuela, receiving full payment in a timely manner remains to be determined,” Scott Hanold, an analyst at RBC Capital Markets LLC, wrote in a note.

Oil’s big reset: Energy majors learn to thrive after

price crash

Bloomberg/London

When Opec started an oil-price war in late 2014, most people believed US shale was doomed. In reality, the giant oil majors suffered most — burdened by expensive mega-projects, Chevron Corp, BP Plc and the rest struggled to adapt to the fall in energy prices.

Slowly, those companies figured out how to survive in the lower-for-longer price era. They cut costs and, more importantly, learned how to stop them from rising again. In an industry that favoured tailored solutions for every project, companies started to talk about standardisation. At closed-door sessions in Davos, Switzerland, Big Oil bosses didn't waste time on self-important talk, but instead discussed how to share the design of anything from underwater valves to pumps.

Nearly five years after the crash, the cultural change is starting to work. The world's major energy companies have managed to press the reset button, allowing them to make profits today similar to what they did in a world of $100-plus a barrel oil prices.

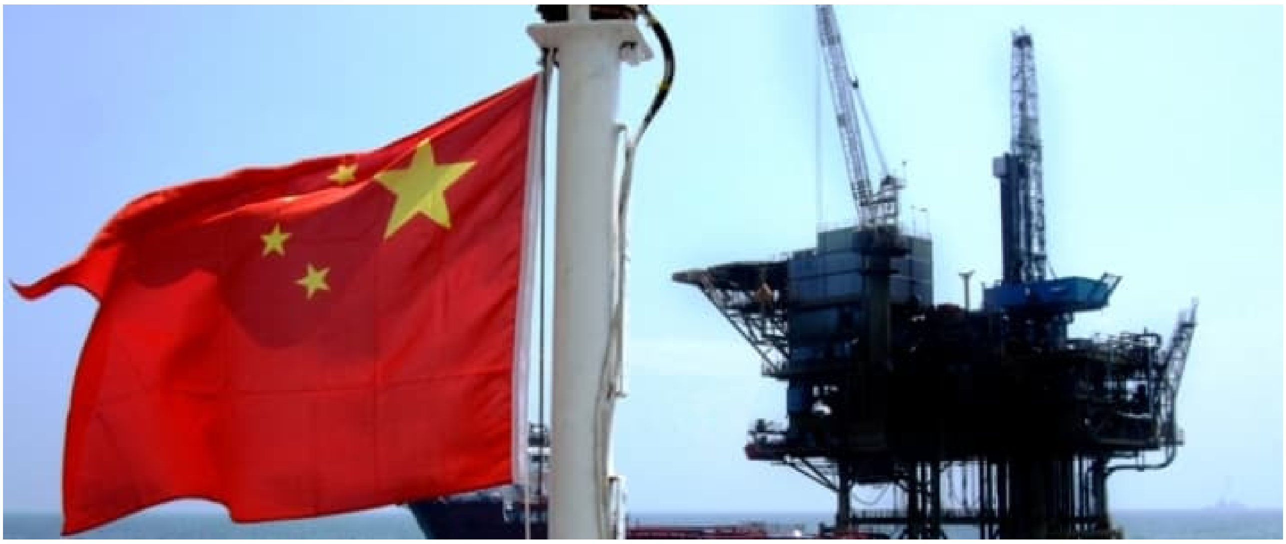
“Big Oil has been able to re-emerge from this downturn stronger and lower on the cost curve,” said Michele Della Vigna, the top oil industry analyst at Goldman Sachs Group Inc, who had been a critic of the majors.
The level of spending at the world’s eight largest integrated oil and gas companies fell last year to $118bn, down 45% from a pre-crisis peak of $215bn in 2013, according to data compiled by Bloomberg News.
But their business model has changed a lot in the process. The reliance on multibillion dollar projects in far-flung corners of the world has been reduced and the majors are pouring billion into Texas’s Permian Basin, once dominated by independent exploration and production companies. Other strategies include trying to build new projects closer to existing ones and reusing old infrastructure to reduce costs. They’ve also re-discovered the joys of integration, investing in refineries and petrochemical plants that make money even when prices are low.
To the surprise of many in the industry, lower costs haven’t translated into slower development. In fact, projects have often come ahead of expectations.
The industry got a lot of help from its suppliers. According to Exxon Mobil Corp, the cost of 3D seismic technology, used to find underground reservoirs, and the deep-water rigs needed to exploit them has fallen more than 50% from the 2013 level.
The new era means combining projects that pay back quickly, whether in US shale or elsewhere, with some traditional larger projects. In the oil industry, it’s a model called short-and-long oil cycle, because some projects pay back in as little to two-to-three years, compared to as long as 10 years for conventional projects.
“Big Oil now wants a diversified portfolio with short-and-long cycle oil,” said Daniel Yergin, the oil historian that this week hosts the annual CERAWeek energy conference in Houston. “Before the oil crisis in 2014-15, the mere concept of short-cycle oil didn’t exist in Big Oil.”
Short-cycle oil has a one big advantage over mega-projects:

companies can dial them up and down quickly to respond to changes in oil and gas prices.

The other significant change is natural gas. Big Oil had already embraced gas before the crisis, with companies like Exxon investing in massive projects in Qatar. But today some executives suggest gas is gaining the upper hand. “Gas is the fastest growing hydrocarbon,” said Bernard Looney, chief executive for upstream at BP. “It’s the future.”

Despite the significant reduction in spending and much lower energy prices, returns haven’t suffered, according to data complied by Bloomberg. The biggest oil companies posted return-on-capital-employed — a traditional yardstick used by investors — of about 8.7% last year, higher than the 8.4% of 2014.

China oil use seen peaking in 2025 as EVs and rail take over



SINGAPORE (Bloomberg) — The country that’s driven global oil demand since the turn of the century may hit the brakes sooner than expected as travelers shift toward electric cars or even forgo the open road in favor of trains.

China’s oil consumption will peak in 2025, five to eight years earlier than market consensus, according to Morgan Stanley analysts including Andy Meng. The reversal will be driven by a transportation model unique to China: While most countries moving up the economic ladder show continued growth in oil demand from increased driving, mass-adoption of electric vehicles and high-speed rail in China will drastically reduce gasoline use, the bank said.

If the theory plays out, it could signal a huge shift for the oil market, which has relied on China for more than a third of global demand growth since 1999. An expanding body of research is painting a bleak future for oil, as rapid adoption of electric vehicles could mean global demand peaks by the 2030s, according to Bank of America and Royal Dutch Shell, a prospect that’s likely to worry energy executives and investors.

“China will no longer be the growth driver of global crude demand,” Meng said in a March 5 report. “We believe the refiners and petroleum stations are the largest potential losers, while the battery companies are likely to become the key winners.”

To be sure, some of the industry’s top prognosticators expect the country’s oil demand to keep growing for years, albeit at a slower pace. The International Energy Agency sees China crude consumption expanding through 2040, while the nation’s largest energy producer China National Petroleum has forecast that gasoline use will peak five years before oil demand does in 2030.

Disruptive Force

China’s electric vehicle penetration will reach 6.4% by the end of the decade and keep rising to 80% by 2040, according to Morgan Stanley, adding that an aggressive push by local battery companies into technology innovation may speed up that timeline.

Meanwhile the country is seeing solid growth in high-speed rail ridership, driven by a well-developed network and severe traffic congestion. Highways’ share of passenger turnover fell to 27% last year from 55% in 2012. In the U.S., the figure was 87% last year, according to Morgan Stanley.

Electric vehicles and high-speed rail are “a disruptive force on China oil demand,” the analysts said. “This pattern has been ignored by most investors in developed markets as there is no such experience from any precedent.”

‘China plans to sustain solar growth with its new policy’

Bloomberg/Beijing

China's plans to loosen its solar subsidy policy will keep growth of the world's largest market intact, according to the head of JinkoSolar Holding Co, which is increasing production capacity by as much as 20% this year.

Installations will probably maintain at about 40 gigawatts, close to the levels last year, Chen Kangping, chief executive officer of the world's largest panel maker, said in an interview in Beijing. China's main industry group said last month the country is planning more supportive policies, which include resuming quotas for some utility-scale projects.

The views from Chen suggest a brighter outlook for global solar companies reeling from Beijing's abrupt decision in the middle of 2018 to halt approvals for some projects and reduce subsidies as part of efforts to curb overcapacity.

The move caused China's solar additions to tumble last year from a record 53 gigawatts in 2017 and spurred predictions in January installations may fall a second year.

"The changes would reflect a maturing of China's solar policy as regulators take more factors into consideration," Chen said Wednesday on the sidelines of the nation's annual parliamentary meeting. "It will help to stabilise the industry and market development."

With the new plan, China Photovoltaic Industry Association said installations could climb in 2019 from 44 gigawatts last year. Citigroup Inc forecast capacity additions of 42 gigawatts, with a potential for a rise to 50 gigawatts.

JinkoSolar will raise panel capacity by 10% to 20% this year from 10.8 gigawatts last year.

Expansion will be in products with more advanced technology and command higher prices, according to Chen.

The supplier will be "cautious" with the rampups, weighing that against sales growth, with output already fully booked for the first half of the year, he said.

India, China to drive natural gas market until 2040: IEF chief

India and China will drive the natural gas market until 2040, International Energy Forum (IEF) secretary general Dr Sun Xiansheng said even as he underlined natural gas's "critical role in achieving sustainable and inclusive growth". The two Asian countries will be the major consumers over the next two decades followed by Africa and the Middle East, he said while delivering the second edition of the 2019 series of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum's (GECF) monthly lecture here yesterday. Indian demand for gas is estimated to grow at 4.9% through 2040 while that of China at 4.7%, Xiansheng said while delivering the lecture entitled "Global Energy Security: The Role of Gas in Sustainable and Inclusive Growth" at the GECF's headquarters in Doha. Africa's demand will grow at an estimated 3.3% between now and 2040, while the Middle East at 2% during the period, he said. Demand in the US, the world's largest economy, will grow at 0.7% through 2040, Xiansheng said. In terms of production, the IEF secretary general noted that Africa will grow at an estimated 3.7% until 2040. Mozambique will drive the African production at 12.2% during the period, he said. The Middle East will follow with a growth rate of 2.2% with Qatar and Iran leading gas production until 2040. In Asia–Pacifi c (2%), Australia and China will be major producers at 3% and 3.9% respectively. In his speech, Xiansheng underlined the critical role of natural gas in achieving sustainable and inclusive growth. This is a fact, he said, that has been proven by all major forecasting agencies, including Opec and the International Energy Agency. “In fact, the share of gas in the global energy mix will be no less than 25% by 2040,” he noted. The fi gure also corresponds with the fi gures projected in the GECF’s own Global Gas Outlook 2040. “Gas will continue to get momentum as it can be a solution to the Paris Agreement Goals,” Xiansheng stated. Looking at producers, he said several new emerging producers are expected in the market, but Qatar will continue to be a steady producer through the forecasted period. In terms of the consumers, the IEF secretary general mentioned there would be a shift to Asia, with China and India having the fastest growth rate. Xiansheng also called for collaboration in terms of policy and investment decisions and a necessity to develop infrastructure and pricing mechanisms. In order to ultimately reach energy security supply, he stressed that “international and regional energy cooperation is the solution”. This is where he praised the role of the GECF and called for the organisation’s “valued contributions” to the dialogue. In order to enhance this dialogue, the GECF will participate in the ‘9th IEA-IEFOPEC Symposium on energy outlook’ next week, of which the GECF will be the fourth partner. GECF secretary general Dr Yury Sentyurin made introductory remarks. Dr Xiansheng is an accomplished authority not only on energy policy related matters, but has ample industry experience, covering both oil and gas production, trading and pipeline construction, gathered through the various roles he held at China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). In his current role as the secretary-general of the IEF, an intergovernmental organisation that aims to foster greater mutual understanding and awareness of common energy interests among its members, he has contributed greatly to the global dialogue on energy. The organisation has some 72 member countries and between themselves account for the bulk of global supply and demand for oil and gas. Considering their similarities and aligned interests, such as encouraging the dialogue between producers and consumers, the GECF and the IEF have been collaborating for several years, an example of that being their joint work on the Joint Organisations Data Initiative (JODI- Gas). And while the focus of the GECF is on natural gas as the cleanest, most effi cient and most versatile source of energy, similarly to the IEF, it looks at the interrelation between gas and other energy sources as well as the sustainable growth of gas markets. Both organisations are united in their belief that achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and especially SDG 7 ‘Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all’ is of prime importance.

Norway’s SWF to sell stakes in exploration, production firms

Reuters /Oslo

Norway’s trillion-dollar sovereign wealth fund, the world’s biggest, will sell its stakes in oil and gas explorers and producers but still invest in energy firms that have refineries and other downstream activities, according to a government plan.

The proposal announced yesterday said the fund’s stakes in integrated companies, such as Royal Dutch Shell, ExxonMobil and other majors involved in everything from exploration to selling fuel at the roadside, would not be sold.

The state, which has built its wealth on the back of North Sea oil and gas reserves, also has no plan to sell its direct stake in Norwegian energy firm Equinor or its direct holdings in Norwegian oil and gas fields.

“The government is proposing to exclude companies classified as exploration and production companies within the energy sector from the (fund) to reduce the aggregate oil price risk in the Norwegian economy,” the Finance Ministry said in a statement.

Energy stocks represented 5.9% of the fund’s equity investments at the end of 2018, worth about $37bn, fund data showed.

But much of that amount is invested in integrated firms rather than smaller, dedicated explorers and producers.

The fund’s shares in the 134 firms to be excluded have a value of about $8bn, the ministry said.

The fund said the shift would affect 1.2% of its equity holdings.

“Exploration and production companies will be phased out from the fund gradually over time,” the government proposal said, without giving a timeline for the divestment.

Among the firms affected are Cairn Energy, in which the fund held 1.92% worth $22mn at the end of 2018, Tullow Oil, in which it held 2.1% worth $67mn, and Premier Oil, with 1.8% worth $12mn.

Those stocks would be replaced by investments in other sectors, broadly weighted in proportion under the fund’s current mandate, the central bank’s deputy governor said in 2017, when the bank made its initial proposal.

The bank manages the fund.

At the end of 2018, the fund’s equity investments were split between the financial sector (23.7%), industrial companies (12.9%), technology (12.6%), consumer goods (11.9%), healthcare (11.4%), consumer services (10.8%), oil and gas (5.9%), basic materials (5.0%), telecoms (3.0%) and utilities (2.8%). The Finance Ministry said the list, based on the FTSE Russell classification, was not final.

For instance, Cheniere, which does not produce oil or gas, but operates gas liquefaction facilities, was featured on the list.

“It will take time to divest from those companies and in the end it could be a different list,” a ministry spokeswoman said.

Parliament, which still needs to approve the proposal, is expected to back the plan as the ruling centre-right coalition has a majority in the assembly.

The news added to pressure on energy companies, whose shares have already slipped due to declining oil prices.

The proposal aims to make Norway’s wealth less vulnerable to a

permanent drop in the price of crude, now the fund has increased its exposure to equities to 70% of its value from 60%. The central bank originally suggested excluding all oil and gas companies, including integrated firms.
But the government adjusted the proposal, saying major firms had the scale to shift to renewable energy.
“To exclude all oil companies would limit the fund’s opportunities,” Finance Minister Siv Jensen said.
The decision to keep stakes in integrated firms drew criticism from those who want Norway to shift more decisively away from fossil fuel investments.
Sony Kapoor, managing director of the think tank Redefine, said diluting the central bank’s plan “represents a victory of Big Oil lobbying over financial prudence and common sense”.
Greenpeace campaigner Martin Norman said the government’s decision “does not address Norway’s exposure to oil and we are not showing the world the way forward”. The opposition Labour Party said it would back the government, even though it argued for a tougher strategy.
“It’s not enough, but we should do this now and then we might see (what to do) in the future,” said Svein Roald Hansen, Labour’s finance spokesman, adding that the state was right to keep its stakes in Equinor and oilfields.
The fund invests Norway’s revenues from oil and gas production for future generations in stocks, bonds and real estate abroad.
Its investments in integrated firms at the end of 2018 included stakes of 2.45% in Shell, 2.31% in BP, 2.02% in Total, 0.99% in Chevron and 0.94% in ExxonMobil.

GLOBAL LNG-Asian spot prices down over 30 pct since start of year

LONDON, March 8 (Reuters) – Asian spot prices for liquefied natural gas (LNG) dropped this week for the eleventh week in a row, and have now lost more than 30 percent in value since the start of the year.

Prices for April delivery to northeast Asia are estimated at $5.70 per million British thermal units, $0.30/mmBtu below last week. That is the first time prompt prices have fallen below $6.00/mmBtu since early August 2017, according to Reuters data.

Prices for May delivery are estimated to be slightly higher than for April, largely due to the very weak prompt price, LNG traders said.

In China, a return of industrial demand after the Luna New Year helped to draw LNG stocks down slightly, sources said.

Inventories in Japan and South Korea were still high.

Spot trade in the Far East was almost non-existent this week, sources said. But there were plenty of deliveries related to long-term contracts or earlier purchases.

In the first eight days of March, 18 cargoes were supplied to China, eight more than in the same period in February, half of which the country was on holiday, Refinitiv Eikon data showed.

In Japan and South Korea, the delivery pace was largely stable in the first week of March, compared with February.

Europe, India and Latin America remain the focus for LNG suppliers.

Shipments of U.S. LNG have gathered pace in March and Europe is likely to receive more U.S. LNG volumes this month.

There are a number of offers from U.S. suppliers for late March deliveries to Europe at a significant discount to the price at the TTF, the Dutch gas hub, an LNG trader said.

The Dutch front-month price declined by around $0.30/mmBtu this week too. But there could be an uptick next week.

“Our balance forecasts indicate tighter conditions both in the UK and on the Continent next week which should provide support to gas prices next week,” Refinitiv analysts said in a weekly note.

“The main drivers are colder weather and outlook for lower LNG sendout.”

In India, prices are around the same level as in the Far East, sources said.

“At some point India will target the TTF level; right now they pay a small premium to that,” an LNG trader said.

India’s Gujarat State Petroleum Corp (GSPC) and Torrent Power issued new buy tenders this week.

“India will continue buying, LNG is cheap and they have space for more supply,” an industry source said.

GSPC did not award its 12 cargo tender for delivery over April 2019 to March 2020 due to higher-than-expected offers, however, traders said.

In Latin America, Argentina’s IEASA issued a new tender on March 1 for 14 cargoes for delivery from May to September. This is a second tender from IEASA this year. Up to nine cargoes from the previous 12-cargo one were awarded to BP, Cheniere and Trafigura, with the other three being re-tendered, a trade source said.

Oversupply on the market is evident as none of the outages or maintenances this year have provided support for prices.

Train 6 at the Qatargas III project at Ras Laffan has been on maintenance in the past two weeks, which is likely a planned one, sources said. There was no impact on Qatar’s exports, one of them added.

Neither a delay in transhipment of Yamal LNG cargoes at Norway’s Nonningsvag this week due to rough weather, nor an explosion on the oil pipeline leading to Nigeria’s Bonny terminal had any price impact either. (Reporting by Ekaterina Kravtsova; Editing by Mark Potter)

Keep politics out of Europe’s

competition decisions

Patrick Rey And Jean Tirole /Toulouse

The European Commission’s decision last month to block the proposed rail-industry merger between Alstom and Siemens was clearly a blow for the two companies. It was also a major setback for the French and German governments, which had strongly supported the deal.

Upset by the decision, France and Germany now want to rewrite EU merger rules and give member states more say over proposed tie-ups. But although such an approach may seem tempting, Europe would be wise not to leave competition policy enforcement in the hands of its politicians.

Supporters of the Alstom-Siemens merger said it would create a European high-speed-train champion to rival China’s CRRC, which operates in a large, and mostly closed, domestic market and – according to the deal’s backers – may soon increase its presence in Europe. But this was not a “no-brainer” merger that would inevitably have made the EU’s rail industry more globally competitive. After all, Alstom and Siemens already dominate their respective national markets for train-signalling systems and high-speed rolling stock.

The merger’s advocates dubbed it “Railbus” in an attempt to draw a parallel with the creation of European aircraft manufacturer Airbus in 1970. But whereas Airbus was a new challenger to Boeing, which had a near-monopoly in the commercial-aviation market at the time, the Alstom-Siemens merger would have reduced the number of players in the European rail industry.

True, Europe must wake up to the challenge posed by China and the United States. The world’s 20 biggest high-tech companies are either Chinese or American, and the same may well be true of the healthcare sector in a decade or two, given developments in artificial intelligence, big data, and genetics. But this Sino-American dominance reflects many factors, and European mega-mergers alone will not redress the balance. And although Alstom and Siemens are understandably frustrated by their lack of access to China’s large high-speed-rail market, this calls for a World Trade Organisation dispute-settlement procedure or for stronger EU trade and procurement policy, not the weakening of its competition policy.

Nonetheless, on February 19, the French and German economy ministers announced a joint plan to revise EU merger rules to enable the creation of European industrial champions. But requiring the European Commission to take into account other matters, such as companies’ global presence, could potentially conflict with its existing mandate to protect EU citizens. After all, the Commission blocked the Alstom-Siemens deal primarily because of serious concerns that it would lead to higher prices for signalling systems and high-speed trains in Europe.

The new Franco-German proposal would give member states the right to override the Commission’s antitrust decisions in “well-defined cases.” But national politicians may be tempted to define such cases broadly in support of a favoured merger. Although elected officials should set the EU’s competition authorities’ overall mandate, enforcement should remain in the hands of the EU Competition Commissioner and the Directorate-

General for Competition.
There are several good reasons for this. For starters, politicians are subject to intense lobbying by large firms and industry organisations, which may be more interested in limiting competition than promoting it. Similarly, political pressures previously encouraged credit booms through lax banking supervision and generous monetary conditions, ultimately leading to central-bank independence. And in network industries such as telecoms or energy, politicians tend to favour artificially low user prices, which can deter investment (for this reason, the US put independent judges in charge of overseeing rate-of-return regulation of public utilities in the early twentieth century.)
Second, even if elected officials resisted such lobbying, they would not necessarily make better decisions than the EU authorities do at present. The Director-General for Competition has a dedicated staff that includes some 30 PhD economists specialising in competition matters. It is doubtful whether national government ministries in Berlin, Paris, or other European capitals would be willing or able to marshal a similar concentration of brainpower.
Finally, the claim that the EU's competition authority is too intrusive is unfounded. If anything, the opposite is true; the European Commission clears the majority of mergers without requiring companies to take remedial steps to address competition concerns. In 2018, for example, the Commission approved 370 mergers unconditionally, and a further 23 with conditions (or "commitments") attached – in most cases after a one-month investigation. The Commission blocked only two mergers in 2017, none in 2018, and fewer than 30 since the EU Merger Regulation was adopted in 1990.
Political frustration at the rejection of a single – albeit high-profile – merger is not a good reason to undermine the EU's long-standing, independent competition authority. Fortunately, there may still be room for industrial policy in Europe, provided this does not involve the traditional French practice of ministers picking winners. A better approach would

be an EU-level policy that draws on the successes of countries such as South Korea and the US. In the latter, for example, the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the National Science Foundation, and the National Institutes of Health have all generated twenty-first-century technologies.

Far from conflicting with EU competition policy, such an approach would help to make European industry more productive and globally competitive. That goal requires keeping Europe's national politicians away from day-to-day competition decisions. — Project Syndicate

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Exxon Mobil CEO sets plan to boost spending; shares sink

NEW YORK: Exxon Mobil Corp said on Wednesday it plans to open its wallet and boost spending for several years to restore flagging oil and gas production, but its shares fell as investors were disappointed that the oil company would not tighten spending and send more money back to shareholders.

Exxon shares fell 1.9 percent in early morning trading to US$78.43 after Chief Executive Officer Darren Woods defended Exxon’s plan to spend US$33 billion to US$35 billion next year, up 10 to 17 percent from US$30 billion this year.

He said the strategy was to be “leaning in as our competitors are leaning back.”

Woods has been under pressure to rein in expenses and boost a share price that has barely increased in the past seven years.

“With investors increasingly pressuring energy companies to return cash to shareholders, it is no surprise that the higher capital budget was not positively received by the market,” said Muhammed Ghulam, analyst with Raymond James.

Woods told the company’s annual meeting for securities analysts that global demand is rising for oil and gas, and that the declining output of existing wells must be replaced.

“This is a compelling case for industry as a whole,” Woods said.

Exxon has laid out aggressive development plans to reverse a dip in production. The company has posted lower output in nine of the last 10 quarters, and has placed one of its biggest bets on shale oil from the Permian Basin in Texas and New Mexico.

Exxon said it expects production from the Permian Basin to rise to 1 million barrels of oil and gas per day as early as 2024. Woods said Exxon can earn a double-digit return in the Permian even at US$35-per-barrel oil, and has the advantage of size, access to capital and better technology than its rivals.

Other major investments include offshore projects in Brazil and in Guyana, where it has discovered 5.5 billion barrels of oil, and global investments in liquefied natural gas.

Exxon forecast capital spending of US$30 billion to US$35 billion each year from 2021 to 2025. Its plans for more than two-dozen global investments contrast with the strategy of most of its rivals, which are making more modest investments in new production while tightening spending and increasing stock buybacks and dividends.

Exxon also responded to investor calls for it to trim some of holdings, saying it would divest US$15 billion in holdings over the next three years.

The success of Exxon’s pitch to analysts and investors “is likely to depend on whether Exxon can convince the market that higher spending today translates to higher returns to shareholders over time, and in the near term this could be helped by ramping up asset sales,” said Biraj Borkhataria, analyst with RBC Europe Limited in a note to clients.

The company said it expects annual cash flow from operations to reach US$60 billion in 2025, on assumption of US$60 per barrel international oil prices.

Analysts and investors have pressured Exxon to be more open and transparent, and Woods opened Wednesday’s analyst meeting by saying he had spent “quite a bit of time engaging with our shareholders,” in the last year. He said the company was releasing more information than it has historically.

Woods also joined the fourth-quarter 2018 conference call to discuss quarterly results with analysts. It was the first time he had done that.

The entire oil industry is out of favor and for years has underperformed other industrial sectors along with the S&P 500.

“This is an industry that a lot of investors hate, whether it’s environmental or track record,” said Brian Youngberg, analyst with Edward Jones. “The general investor is sick of the cyclicality.”

Read more at https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/business/exxon-mobil-ceo-sets-plan-to-boost-spending–shares-sink-11318046