Book Reviews

Amineh, Mehdi P., & Yang Guang (eds.)


Secure Oil and Alternative Energy is the second and last volume coming out of a research project shared by respectively the KNAW and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. In their introduction, the editors argue that shared interests of China and the EU create conditions for cooperation between these large energy importers and point to the obstacles to overcome. The work divides its 13 articles into two parts, respectively entitled “Geopolitics, geo-economy and energy” and “Renewable energy and sustainable development”. The papers are written by specialists, often drawing from their ongoing research, yet address a larger audience. The editors have cast their net wide. At the regional level, Cutler and Umbach, each focus on Caspian and Central-Eurasian energy, though from a different perspective, while Sun Hongbo studies energy linkages between China and Latin America with the focus on Venezuela. The work has three chapters on Iran as foreign policy actor and oil exporter. At the national level, Rakel reports on elite change and its impact on the foreign policy orientation of Iran since the presidency of Ahmadinejad. Yu Guoqing studies Chinese-Iranian relations since the conclusion of the 1942 Friendship Treaty between Persia and the Kuomintang government. Currently, Iran is a substantial oil supplier to China. Unlike China, Japanese-Iranian relations, studied by Raquel Shaoul, are severely constrained by Japan’s alliance with the US. Despite America’s inability to supply oil to Japan, its government has since 2005 duly supported US sanctions on Iran. Zhao Huirong and Wu Hongwei follow up the theme of Umbach and Cutler with a case study of Chinese-Kazakh bilateral political economy of oil and gas deals, competing with the geo-political interests of particularly Russia. Chen Mo, reflecting on the long bilateral relations between China and Angola, writes on the current ‘oil for infrastructure’ exchange relation between them. In the 1970’s Chinese-Russian competition in Angola landed China on the same side as the US, both supporting UNITA of Savimbi.
Part two, on clean energy, comprises five chapters, four of which are at the national level. Scholten writes on green innovation; Li Xiaohua studies the Chinese solar energy sector; Lima reports on biofuel developments in Brazil and its contested sustainability. Vermeer investigates causes of the slowing down of the hydro-energy projects announced in the 2008 National Development and Reform Commission’s plan. Hydropower is the largest source of efficient renewable energy. He finds that the 2007 change from high to low electricity prices, affecting investor’s rate of return, is one cause. The fragmented policy making machinery, driven by conflicting national and provincial actor interests, resettlement costs and concerns about responses to environmental impacts of the often large projects, are part of the equation. At the same time solar and wind energy equipment producers pressure for the expansion of their business. The recent trade conflict between the EU and China about solar panel subsidies testifies to the link-up between the industry and the Chinese government. The disappointment expressed by the US on the EU’s compromise with China, highlights the global importance of solar industry, as well as its clout, in China and the US. Germany is the largest producer of solar panels in the EU and this sector lost influence relative to automotive and machine tool export to the PRC. Vermeer takes into account the implication of the slowdown in hydropower for China’s 2010 Copenhagen commitment to procure 15% of electricity from non-fossil resources.

The work concludes with an essay on the somewhat torturous notion of global energy governance and its evolution since early 20th century, a thing that in the words of the author “is highly diffuse and almost non-existent”. Borrowing from Beriman’s Earth System Governance, the author sees global energy governance at work where others tend to see the pursuit of national interest by the strongest powers.

What to make out of this vast and multi-authored study? The editors of the work under review hint to potential areas of cooperation between these two large energy importers. However, this theme does not figure explicitly in the work. In my opinion, that’s unfortunate. Relations between domestic growth and international conflict about raw materials got, and still gets, most of scholarly attention. Take for example the still influential study of Nazli Choucri and Robert C. North, Nations in conflict. National Growth and International Violence. San Francisco: Freeman 1975. They developed a model, and tested its observable implications empirically, for the era of Europe’s second industrial revolution annex competitive colonisation drive. They found strong linkages between and among the expansion of industry in Western European countries, domestic pressure to go beyond borders to get access to resources, conflicting claims on territory and maritime trade routes, alliance activity, military