Energy (in)security: world-making in an age of scarcity

The Istanbul Policy Center-Sabanci University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative organized a seminar entitled “Energy (in)security: world-making in an age of scarcity” by Prof. Dr. Gavin Bridge (Durham University, Department of Geography) on Friday, June 12, 2015. This event was organized by 2014/15 Mercator-IPC Fellow Dr. Ethemcan Turhan. This seminar explored the different ways in which energy (in)security is now being used and reflected on the political work it currently performs. The following summary provides an overview on the seminar given by Prof. Bridge and the subsequent discussion.

Mercator-IPC Fellow Dr. Ethemcan Turhan opened the event by explaining the Mercator-IPC Fellowship Program as part of the IPC-Sabanci University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative. The main goals of the Initiative are to strengthen Turkey-EU relations and the Turkey-Germany relationship through research in EU/German-Turkish relations, climate change, and education. The speaker, Prof. Gavin Bridge, is an economic geographer who focuses on the oil, gas, and mining sectors. In this seminar, Prof. Bridge delivered a speech rethinking the securitization of energy. This event was made possible also by contributions from ENTITLE – European Network of Political Ecology.

Prof. Bridge began his presentation by considering how society talks about natural resource problems and how they are framed. He focused specifically on the framing between two ideas—energy and security. His argument is that energy security is now a key policy framing and serves particular political interests. This makes energy security at the heart of energy policy and national security policy itself.

Prof. Bridge approached his argument in three steps. First, he suggested, there is a link between energy and security, where matters of energy are framed as matters of security. This is the securitization of energy, and its consequence is that it lifts security and energy above everyday politics and gives it a national prominence.

Secondly, as a framing, energy security requires various ways to make it tractable. This thus requires new techniques for the science of energy security, such as producing new metrics looking at security risk. Thirdly, these techniques are performative, and produce new political relationships.

Energy security has emerged amidst a variety of other policy framings for energy besides security. Energy security as a framing resonates because it connects personal worlds to the reproduction of the nation. Energy
security is also difficult to define, since both “energy” and “security” are so plastic and abstract. Therefore, to understand what people mean when they talk about energy security, one must ask, “Security for who? For what means? And by what ends?” By asking these questions, it also allows one to understand the landscape of responsibility, dependency and control for energy security.

“But why energy security here and now?” Prof. Bridge asked. First, it is because energy securitization occurred in the wake of liberalizing energy markets and deregulating economies. Therefore, energy is positioned as an object of state interests and is given renewed state oversight. Second, in the context of global and regional rising powers, there are shifts in the center of energy demand outside of OECD economies. This suggests that OECD economies have lost control over energy demand, and the new supply is reoriented to other growing markets. Third, there is concern over declining output from existing sources of energy supply. Thus, there are concerns over securing current levels of supply. Fourth, there is the expanding definition of security, where security is detached from a direct association with military security and is linked with human security.

So how is energy security being used? First, there is the dominant sovereign logic, which focuses on external threats to national space. Framed that way, energy security is a security issue to countries that are net importers or net exporters of oil and gas.

However, there were growing concerns regarding affordability and acceptability, which adds not just issues of state survival but also to quality of life. Thus, there is the second, and emergent, logic of population security. This logic changes the focus from cross-border flows to internal organization of population. The third and also emergent logic is vital systems security. It looks at the infrastructure systems that transport and deliver energy, and draws attention to the consumption of energy services.

Prof. Bridge went on to discuss other comments regarding the three logics, such as the overlooking of the role of transnational corporations, how the logic of securitization sets the conditions of life at stake, and how energy security means securing the status quo and normalizing other forms of insecurity.

He argued that energy securitization could be turned into tools of policy through the use of indicators. Energy indicators, which he named as geometrics, have become new ways to measure security and insecurity, vulnerability, risk, and resilience. These tools became instrumental in making energy security a mode of governance and thus subject to political control. These indicators are political technologies and hence are performative.

Prof. Bridge concluded his speech with the observation that there is still room to unshackle energy security from a realist perspective. For example, in energy indicators, one could look at the household level instead of the state level, or look at corporations instead of nations.

There was a lively Q & A session. There were questions about the implications of energy security to Turkey and instability in the greater Middle East region. In response to a question about the local scale of energy security, Prof. Bridge talked about transition towns, where cities try to become more resilient to energy shocks. Another asked how
energy securitization changes how populations are controlled. Prof. Bridge responded that the primary driver of demand for energy comes from economic growth rather than population growth per se and hence energy securitization occurs often in countries with high economic growth. He also brought up how the language of energy access is linked with distributional problems within a population. There were other questions about alternative forms of energy and the role of corporations in the context of energy security. Prof. Bridge responded by emphasizing the importance of national regulatory structures in ensuring compliance.