Biden Makes a Fruitless Attempt to Play the Qatari Card against Russia

By promoting a Russophobic campaign in Europe, in part by escalating the information war with a fake thesis about Russia's alleged intention to attack Ukraine, Washington is trying to convince Europeans that it can find a vital substitute for Europe's natural gas supply here. In particular, the Joe Biden administration is seeking additional sources of natural gas in North Africa, Middle East, Asia, as well as in the US itself, engaging with major LNG buyers and suppliers to "ensure the flexibility of existing contracts and storage facilities and the ability to divert gas to Europe." In this regard, there are active discussions with Qatar to increase the supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Europe in order to "eliminate Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas."

Against the backdrop of bitter disputes between the United States, the West, and Russia over such issues as Ukraine and NATO eastward expansion, these American moves are designed to "sever ties" between the EU and Moscow on economic and energy issues, and to further unite European allies on the political path of US strategic pressure on Russia.

Recall that Russia provides about a third of the energy needs of Western Europe and supplies these countries with about 200 billion cubic meters of gas (Gazprom is contractually obliged to pump 40 billion cubic meters per year through Ukraine alone). However, many experts and analysts have already called the above attempts by Washington to find a replacement for cheap pipeline gas from Russia in Europe "a pointless fuss." Although the share of short-term transactions in the global LNG market has increased from 16% in 2009 to 40% in 2020, it is nevertheless difficult for these deals to reach the same volume and prices as for natural gas supplies by pipeline due to the problem of LNG compression and transportation costs. Therefore, LNG can only play a supplementary role in the volumes of gas transported to various countries.
Nevertheless, the White House has intensified talks with major natural gas producers around the world in recent weeks, assessing their capabilities. Keith Pitt, Australia’s federal Minister for Resources and Water, has already announced his potential readiness to supply LNG to Europe, but concealed that such gas with an additional price for its transportation would be several times more expensive for Europeans and therefore is hardly a competitive option to cheap Russian pipeline gas.

Within the same context, Washington began to actively engage with Qatar. To this end, a meeting was held at the White House between US President Joe Biden and the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. The discussions covered not only the problems of the Middle East, but also the more global issue of energy security. Following their outcome, Biden notified his guest of his desire to designate his country as a key ally external to NATO, “in recognition of the strategic partnership” between the states, “which has deepened over the past 50 years.” Thus, Qatar could become the third Persian Gulf country after Bahrain and Kuwait to enjoy such a privileged status. The importance of the current emphasis on the development of relations with Doha for the Biden administration is evidenced by the fact that Qatar was the first Gulf state whose head was invited to the White House to discuss new "strategic American interests" both in the Middle East region and in Ukraine, in opposition to Russia.

Recall that Qatar has long been a US foothold in the Middle East. The US military base at Al Udeid, southwest of Doha, hosts about 10,000 US troops, as well as US Central Command (CENTCOM) forward headquarters for planning and executing military operations in the Middle East. Next to it is the 609th Air and Space Operations Control Center. There is enough military equipment in the warehouses of the American base in Qatar to fully equip one American brigade. The US military base in Qatar played a significant role in the deployment of troops for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. US forces concentrated in Qatar are now taking part in military operations throughout the region, including against the terrorist group Daesh (banned in Russia) in Syria and Iraq. Qatar itself has also carried out several airstrikes in Syria against Daesh as part of the US anti-terrorist coalition.

Qatar is the world’s second largest exporter of LNG, only slightly behind the United States, and plays an important role in global energy markets. That is why Washington decided to place a special bet on Doha in its struggle to oust Russia from the European gas market. However, since Qatar already has several energy contracts with Asian countries, it is unclear whether it has enough gas production capacity to help supply Europe.

Nevertheless, at the insistence of Washington, the leadership of the European Union turned to Qatar for assistance. However, Doha in its response has already made a number of uncomfortable demands of the EU. In particular, to impose a moratorium on the reversal of gas to non-EU countries, thereby opposing the provision of additional income to Poland or another country on the resale of blue fuel to Kiev. Another demand of Doha was similar to the one already put forward by Moscow: contracts must be made on a long-term basis, since short-term gas supplies requested by Brussels are not acceptable to Doha, given how unprofitable they are in terms of gas industry planning. The Qatari emirs cited as the third condition the termination of the antitrust investigation against the country, which began in 2018 when the European Commission commenced to suspect Doha of violating EU free trade rules.

With Washington and Brussels engaged in a backroom struggle with Russia to restrict its access to the European gas market and to oppose the commissioning of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, Gazprom has concluded an agreement with China on additional supplies of blue fuel to the Celestial Empire, thus leaving the EU with fewer and fewer potential opportunities for future gas cooperation with Moscow. Sooner or later, Europe will have to fall back to long-term mutual trust and cooperation with Moscow in this regard, and avoid politicizing energy issues to the advantage of Washington if it is to effectively solve the problem of its own energy supply.

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