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Invasion accelerating clean energy transition

On February 24th, the President of Russia launched a brutal and unprovoked illegal attack against the people of Ukraine and against the rules-based international order. In a matter of hours, it profoundly changed our world – and brought issues of energy security very much to the forefront.

It also may well prove to be an inflection point in a parallel crisis that is changing our world – climate change.

In response to Russia's brutal aggression, Europe is doubling down on energy independence from Russia and on accelerating the transition to a low carbon future.

In recent weeks, issues of energy security have gained heightened prominence and strategic consideration as Putin's invasion has highlighted Europe's vulnerability to its reliance on Russian oil and gas.

In my discussions with ministers from European countries, including at a recent International Energy Agency Ministerial meeting, European leaders have been clear. They want to very quickly reduce their reliance on Russian oil and gas by looking to source supplies from friendly, stable countries.

However, it goes beyond this. These leaders do not just want to reduce their reliance on Russian oil and gas – they want to reduce their reliance on oil and gas altogether.

As the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, stated earlier this month, "It is our switch to renewables and hydrogen that will make us truly independent. We have to accelerate the green transition."

"It's hard, bloody hard," said EU Commission vice-president Frans Timmermans. "But it's possible if we're willing to go further and faster than we've done before."

Moving with a speed few would have thought possible prior to the invasion, the European Union has now laid out a strategy that could cut reliance on Russian natural gas by two-thirds within a year. The EU roadmap essentially proposes doubling down on greener sources of power and enhancing energy efficiency in the medium to longer term, while finding alternative, more reliable suppliers of oil and gas in the near term.

How Canada can help

Within the framework of our climate commitments, Canada is looking to do what we can to help our European friends with supply in the short-term. However, we are also very much engaged with Europe on how we may assist them in even greater ways in the longer term.

Canada is uniquely positioned to contribute to building a clean energy European economy. We are already leaders in many clean and non-emitting technologies, and we possess significant raw resources that will be critical in the green transition.

Clean hydrogen is one clean fuel/energy carrier that Europe (and Canada) is particularly interested in – as Europe looks to eventually transition away from the use of natural gas. Canada is already one of the top hydrogen producers in the world, and we are building on our existing strengths.

Acceleration needed

The need to accelerate the transition to a low-carbon future was further underlined by the release on February 28th of the most comprehensive catalogue yet of the consequences of global heating.

A much-anticipated report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) found that about half of the world's population is now acutely vulnerable to disasters stemming from the burning of fossil fuels.

Both the IPCC report and the invasion of Ukraine have crystallized the human, economic and geopolitical calamity of the combustion of fossil fuels and highlighted the need for rapid transition to a clean economy.

It was Desmond Tutu who said, "A time of crisis is not just a time of anxiety and worry. It gives a chance, an opportunity, to choose well or to choose badly."

In the face of the horror of Ukraine, there are indications world leaders in Europe and North America are resolute in their commitment to partner to address energy security and climate change crises. Canada will be at the forefront of these discussions.

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