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## Responding to the Weaponization of Energy Dependencies: Hybrid Threats, National Security Interests, and Securitization

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The geopolitical development following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the sabotage of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines have significantly transformed the role of the Norwegian petroleum sector. A direct outcome of this situation is the designation of "transport of gas by pipelines to Europe" as a fundamental national function, which essentially means that gas transport to Europe is recognized as a matter of national security under the Norwegian Security Act. This represents a novel application of the Security Act, where the definition of national security interests has been expanded to include "the relationship with other states and international organizations". This allows for the consideration of infrastructure or services as essential to Norwegian national security, even if they are not located within Norway or directly coupled to Norwegian domestic safety and security. Our paper explores the expansion of the national security interest concept through the lenses of securitization and weaponization, both of which have played a role in framing the issue as a matter of national security. We analyze how the evolving security landscape, characterized by hybrid threats, currently and in the future, lays the ground for these developments. Utilizing the Norwegian petroleum sector as a case study, we draw on official Norwegian reports as empirical data. We conclude that the shifting security landscape, with its emphasis on hybrid threats and great power competition, will further drive the weaponization of various sectors, potentially leading to the securitization of new industries. This evolution will have implications for organizations and their risk management strategies.

**Keywords:** geopolitics, hybrid threats, national security interests, securitization, weaponization, energy dependencies.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical development following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the sabotage of energy infrastructures – particularly the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines – have significantly transformed the role of the Norwegian petroleum sector. The backdrop of the change is that Norway and the Norwegian petroleum sector has gained increased importance for both Norwegian and European energy security amidst the new geopolitical circumstances (HAVTIL, 2024). As gas supplies from Russia has come to a halt,

Norway has emerged as Europe's foremost gas supplier. Norwegian energy infrastructure has also increasingly become a focal point for various threats commonly categorized as hybrid threats, including cyberattacks, espionage, and sabotage.

A direct outcome of this situation is the designation of "transport of gas by pipelines to Europe" as a fundamental national function, recognized as a matter of national security under the Norwegian Security Act. This represents a novel application of the Security Act, and a legal broadening of what constitutes national security

interests under the Act. Now, Norwegian national security interests include infrastructures and supplies that are not directly critical to Norway's peace and stability, but primarily critical to other European countries. Norway's energy supply is positioned as a critical national security interest, essential for the security of Europe, thereby linking energy policy with both national and regional security issues. The relevant statute in the Act defines national security interests as encompassing "the relationship with other states and international organizations" (Security Act, § 1-5, chapter 1c).

The debate on whether the Norwegian petroleum sector and its infrastructures is critical to national security or should be regarded as a national security interest in accordance with the Security Act precede the invasion of Ukraine, the Nord Stream sabotage and the Security Act itself. Since the petroleum sector is the main source of income for the Norwegian state, the sector has for decades been deemed vital to Norwegian security in multiple ways by many different actors, and several White Papers and hearings portray the sector as one that is and should be considered vital to national security (Botnan & Lausund, 2016; NOU 2016: 19). However, it was the geopolitical landscape emerging after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, along with the Nord Stream gas pipelines sabotage, that prompted a re-evaluation of the role of the Norwegian petroleum industry in national security policy. This underscores the importance of threat and crisis perception in determining what is deemed essential for national security.

The Norwegian Security Act underscores the principle of decentralized responsibility by allocating sector-specific accountability for the identification and management of security risks. This framework enables authorities to identify businesses that are vital to national security and to monitor their adherence to the provisions of the Act. Central to the Norwegian Security Act is the process of risk assessment, which is essential for safeguarding national security interests. Entities subjected to the Act are mandated to perform regular risk assessments to pinpoint vulnerabilities, threats, and dependencies related to national security (Security Act, 2019). These evaluations inform the establishment of appropriate security measures aimed at mitigating risks and ensuring a sufficient level of security. Furthermore, the Act

upholds democratic principles while addressing security threats by enforcing security measures in accordance with legal standards. This decentralized responsibility, coupled with a risk-based security approach, requires companies subjected to § 1-5, chapter 1c of the Act to undertake risk analyses that evaluate threats to Norwegian national security interests, while also considering Norway's relationships with other states and international organizations (Security Act, § 1-5, chapter 1c). This new obligation arises within a contemporary security landscape marked by geopolitical tensions and an increased emphasis on hybrid threats (Hansen & Antonsen, 2024; Skare & Jore, 2024).

The objective of this paper is to analyze the expansion of the notion of national security interests through the mechanisms of securitization and weaponization, both of which play a role in categorizing an issue as a national security concern. We explore how the evolving security policy environment, particularly regarding hybrid threats, has established a foundation for these processes in the present and future contexts. The Norwegian petroleum sector serves as a case study for our examination. The empirical data underpinning the paper are derived from official Norwegian documents, including government reports, white papers, and threat assessments.

First, we outline the conceptual framework underpinning this paper. Subsequently, we examine how official Norwegian documents articulate the evolving geopolitical security landscape, emphasizing hybrid threats and the changing roles of organizations. Following this, we investigate the portrayal of national security interests in Norwegian official documents. Finally, we discuss how the notion of national security interests has expanded through the mechanisms of securitization and weaponization.

## **2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

To explore the broadening scope of national security interests, we utilize a conceptual framework centered on securitization and weaponization. This framework enables us to clarify how emerging domains may fall under the purview of organizations' responsibility and risk management systems. Prior to detailing this conceptual framework, we will first examine the notion of hybrid threats, which is crucial in the contemporary security policy environment.

### 2.1. Hybrid threats

In the academic literature, “hybrid threats” is a modern concept referring to a combination of actions targeting adversary states, including actions below the threshold of conventional warfare (Bjørge & Høiby, 2024). Hybrid CoE (2024) defines hybrid threats as “harmful activities that are planned and carried out with malign intent [aiming] to undermine a target, such as a state or an institution, through a variety of means, often combined”. Hybrid threats do not necessarily target state armies but society at large, and operations can combine conventional military and non-military methods, exploit economic and political superiority with coercion or force, and influence societal cognition through manipulation of democratic processes. Such tactics are increasingly aided by “hyperconnectivity” (Storesund et al., 2024). With digitalization pushing cybertechnology faster and further for industrial digital integration and automation, and consequent societal expectancy and dependency, states increasingly face threats that are complex and ambiguous.

The concept of hybrid threats has received scholarly criticism for being a buzzword with limited analytical value that does not contain anything noticeably new. Moreover, the concept is criticized for distorting the traditional distinctions between peace, conflict, and war, and for being stretched so broad as to become synonymous with states’ grand political strategy itself (Cullen & Wegge, 2021; Reichborn-Kjennerud & Cullen, 2016; Skare & Jore, 2024).

### 2.2. Hybrid threats and weaponization

Cyberattacks, surveillance, and sabotage targeting critical infrastructure are increasingly utilized as components of hybrid tactics. Such attacks can inflict both physical and economic damage, as well as social disruption, without provoking a military response, provided that the incidents cannot be definitively attributed. The intersection of organized crime with state interference has become more pronounced in contemporary contexts, both in cyberspace and the physical realm. The advancements in cybertechnology offer perpetrators the means to evade attribution for their actions. Furthermore, neither hybrid threats nor the concept of proxies is explicitly defined or acknowledged within

international law (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2024), allowing these activities to remain pivotal in circumventing the declaration of war and, consequently, a military response.

Within the scope of the increasingly complex threat landscape, the range of coercive ways to “weaponize” something to gain political leverage is expanding. Weaponization is the process of transforming something into a weapon or potential weapon to deliberately inflict harm (Galeotti, 2022). Because of globalization, where states are prone to focus on building expertise for resource extraction and production within specific sectors to amplify productivity in terms of the cost and effect benefit that it brings, states are becoming more interdependent. ‘Weaponized Interdependence’ scholarship argues that this leads to asymmetry, a rise of systematic inequality consisting of chokepoints of vulnerable interdependence (Boute, 2022; Farrell & Newman, 2019; Petersen, 2023). Large industrial entities functioning within the global market are increasingly gaining power in relation to the dependencies their products create for their customers. These imbalanced relationships can be leveraged by governments to exert influence over the political decision-making processes of other nations (Petersen, 2023). Although this can be relevant to any industrial sector, recent years have demonstrated Europe’s importance of tackling the risks of energy weaponization by sanctioning, diversifying, building resilience, and securitizing energy supplies (Boute, 2022; Keypour, 2022; Meyer, 2024). Weaponization plays a significant role in hybrid threats or hybrid warfare, denoting the intentional transformation of an object or concept into a weapon by an adversary or hostile state.

### 2.3. Securitization

While the concept of weaponization refers to the process of an adversary that transforms something into a (potential) weapon to deliberately inflict harm or create fear, the concept of securitization refers to a process through which actors “transform subjects from regular political issues into matters of ‘security’, and consequently enable extraordinary means to be used in the name of security” (Buzan et al., 1998). This process relies on a securitizing actor framing the issue as urgent and persuading an audience to accept it as a security matter. Success depends on

audience acceptance and facilitating conditions, such as the actor's authority and the perceived severity of the threat. Security policy discursive orders often contribute to instigate fear or a sense of urgency among the public, allowing for legal acts to be passed and military action to be taken over short time and limited public insight and scrutiny (Nohrstedt & Ottosen, 2014). In crises, democratic processes are indeed often set aside for urgency and insecurity.

In recent years, academic scholarship on securitization has showed how securitization can also take the form of 'riskification' which is a social process where a policy area is constructed in terms of risk, not threat (Corry, 2012).

### 3. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

#### 3.1. *Norwegian official documents' description of hybrid threats*

According to multiple Norwegian official documents, Norway faces a more serious threat environment than in decades. Several Norwegian official documents describe great power rivalry as the major driver of security and geopolitics today and in the future (NOU 2023:14; NOU 2023:17; Meld. St. 9 [2024–2025]). According to these documents, the international security situation is more unstable, dangerous and competitive than in a long time. With the ongoing struggle for global influence among democracies, authoritarian regimes, and disruptive non-state actors, global tensions and uncertainty are likely to persist (NOU 2023:14; NOU 2023:17; Meld. St. 9 [2024–2025]). For Norway, the foremost threat actor is neighboring Russia. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked the definitive end of the post-Cold War era and a turning point for Norway's relationship with Russia. Currently, Europe's relationship with Russia is at a historic low point and can best be described as a clash of opposing values and security interests (Norwegian Intelligence Service, 2024). Moreover, the West's relationship with China is characterized by deep competition, primarily between China and the United States, and represents the overarching and dimensioning geopolitical long-term challenge.

According to the Norwegian Defense Commission (NOU 2023:14), hybrid threats will challenge Norwegian national security interests in decades to come. According to Norwegian authorities, hybrid threats is a term for strategies of competition and confrontation below the threshold

of direct armed conflict that can combine diplomatic, informational, military, economic and financial, intelligence and legal means to achieve strategic objectives. The use of policy instruments is often widely distributed, long-term in its approach, and combines overt, covert, and subtle techniques (Meld. St. 10 [2021–2022]).

In the discourse of Norwegian authorities, hybrid threats are primarily linked to hostile states and include a wide range of measures, also democratic and legal means. Hybrid threats are described as state and non-state actors that can use various non-military measures to target political institutions, influence public opinion and undermine Norwegian security through measures such as disruptive technologies, digital and cyber measures, disinformation and propaganda campaigns. Targets such as infrastructure, governmental and private institutions, and public opinion can be attacked with increasing speed, scale and intensity. Consequently, the distinction between peace, crisis and conflict is blurred, and so is the distinction between military and civilian sectors. Therefore, private enterprises and civil society are becoming important in the total defense of Norway (Meld. St. 9 [2024–2025]).

Critical infrastructures are currently owned and operated by private companies, often outside their own national borders and Norwegian sovereignty. The consequence is that important decisions that could influence Norwegian security are the responsibility of commercial and non-state actors. Moreover, the private sector owns approximately 80 percent of critical infrastructures in Norway, including energy, transport, water, food etc., that are crucial for society to function in peacetime, crisis and war. The energy sector is described as a sector particularly becoming a key economic and security policy factor and a vital national security interest (NOU 2023:14). All the annual threat assessments from Norwegian intelligence agencies identify the petroleum industry as vital to the security of both Norway and Europe. For instance, the Norwegian Intelligence Service's annual threat assessment states that "*Currently, Norway is a key supplier of gas to Europe. Norwegian gas fields and terminals are directly connected to receiving countries in Europe through a vast pipeline network [...] Damage to Norwegian petroleum infrastructure would harm both Norway and the*

*receiving countries in Europe.*” (Norwegian Intelligence Service, 2024).

However, also other sectors and particularly private companies are now pivotal to Norwegian security. Economy, technology and energy have once again become security policy. Securing value chains that support national interests and societal functions have therefore become more important (NOU 2023:14; NOU 2023:17; Meld. St. 9 [2024–2025]). The new role of private companies is illustrated by this quote from the Norwegian Security Authority: *“Norwegian business and industry now play a greater role in national security. [...] Norwegian companies must think about security in everything they do, from hiring and procurement to change of ownership... We now see that companies and people who have previously rarely been involved in the work on national security are becoming central”* (National Security Authority, 2024). Businesses in the petroleum and power sector, electronic communications and marine technology, the data center industry, and research and education are pointed out as particularly central (ibid.).

Several Norwegian official documents clearly describe how hostile foreign states, especially Russia, are weaponizing particularly energy deliverances, but also other sectors are referred to as sectors that are or could potentially be weaponized. Norwegian governmental documents also describe how Russia has mapped Norwegian critical oil and gas infrastructure for years, both physically and in the digital domain. The acquired knowledge could become important in a potential conflict situation.

### **3.2. Norwegian official documents’ conceptualization of national security interests**

In 2019, a new Security Act entered into force in Norway. A central concept in this Act was that of “national security interests” (Security Act, 2019). In its preparatory work, an understanding of state security as separate from societal security, as had informed the previous Security Act (operative from 1998), was deemed outdated. The preparatory work stressed the importance of how the concept of national security interests should be expanded to also apply to the parts of civil society that were deemed important to national security interests (NOU 2016: 19). The Security Act thus connects and integrates state security and

civil and societal security. The former Security Act did not use the term “national security interests”. Instead, it used terms such as “national security” and “other vital national security interests”. The new Security Act utilizes the concept of “national security interests” with the aim to “contribute to safeguarding Norway's sovereignty, territorial integrity and democratic form of government and other national security interests”, cf. Section 1-1. Another difference between the new and the old Security Act lies in its adaptation to contemporary society’s reliance on technological and new security policy challenges.

The new Security Act gives companies great freedom in their preventive security work by replacing detailed rules with functional requirements. This means that the Security Act does not specify specific measures but give companies flexibility to choose solutions that suit their risks, at the same time as it delegates responsibility for risk assessment and implementation of security measures.

In the Security Act of 2019, “national security interests” was introduced as a comprehensive and modern definition. The preparatory work describes “vital national security interests” as a collective term that covers multiple fields within Norway’s total security needs. Accordingly, the threshold for when something qualifies as a threat to national security interests should be high. Additionally, it is emphasized that the concept of national security interests should not be static but should be regarded as a concept that can be redefined in accordance with societal developments and changed security political landscapes (NOU, 2016, p. 48). Since the intention behind the Security Act is flexibility in what should be national security interests, this opens for new interpretations of what could be a national security interest in the future.

The concept of national security interests is defined in Section 1-5 (1) of the Security Act as: the country’s sovereignty, territorial integrity and democratic form of government, and overriding security policy interests related to: (a) the activities, security and freedom of action of the highest state bodies; (b) defense, security and contingency preparedness; (c) relations with other states and international organizations; (d) economic stability and freedom of action; and (e)



fundamental societal functions and the basic security of the population. To protect the national security interests, the state must have contact with various civil authorities and enterprises, as these support the state's ability to safeguard its national security interests. Therein lies the relationship and interweaving between the state's interests at the overall level and the need for enterprises at the societal level that are included in protecting the interests of the state (Meld. St. 5 [2020-2021]).

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Securitization resulting from evolving threats

Prior to the Nord Stream incident, no specific objects, systems or functions in the petroleum sector had officially been appointed as basic national functions, and thus not a national security interest under the jurisdiction of the Security Act. Over the years, there have however been extensive debates on whether the sector should be subjected to the Security Act. The traditional security actors in Norway have made several attempts to securitize the sector, primarily because the sector could be a terrorist target. However, the sector itself has rejected this securitization move, primarily over concern about the cost for the industry (NRK, 2022). The sector has acknowledged its importance for the Norwegian *economy* but has argued that an attack on the industry will have limited consequences for Norway's *territorial security and sovereignty*. This argument was disputed by stakeholders claiming that a significant reduction in gas supplies to Europe would have major consequences for some of Norway's closest allies and trading partners (Botnan & Lausund, 2016).

Eventually, it was the sector's criticality for gas supply to Europe that brought parts of the sector under the Security Act (National Security Authority, 2021b). This securitization of the industry primarily took place in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Nord Stream pipeline sabotage in September 2022. At the time, 115 unidentified offshore drone observations around Norwegian petroleum installations had been reported to the Norwegian Police, and media attention was directed towards the alleged absence of emergency preparedness in the sector. The outcome was a collection of different actions, which encompassed NATO ships monitoring offshore facilities, armed military personnel

safeguarding onshore sites, and the appointing of gas supplies to Europe as a matter of national security. The recognition of a severe crisis resulted in the acceptance of these securitization measures, as energy security was portrayed as both a weapon and a threat to Norwegian and European security.

Importantly, the Norwegian government was not the sole actor involved in the securitization of the Norwegian petroleum industry. Following the Nord Stream incident, various actors across multiple levels played a role in the securitization of the Norwegian petroleum sector. NATO, and individual allied countries have been central, too. NATO has underscored the importance of safeguarding critical infrastructures, such as subsea pipelines, and has enhanced surveillance and deterrence strategies. Consequently, an assault on Norwegian petroleum infrastructure might be construed as an attack on NATO in accordance with Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, contingent upon the specific circumstances. However, the securitization of petroleum infrastructures did not end with the subjugation of parts of the industry under the Security Act. The Nord Stream sabotage has prompted Norway to intensify its securitization efforts, focusing on protecting its critical energy infrastructure through enhanced surveillance, military collaboration, and proactive threat assessments. Norwegian petroleum companies have significantly bolstered the security of its oil and gas installations, both offshore and onshore. The joint securitization efforts include the deployment of armed forces for patrols, enhanced maritime and subsea surveillance, including the monitoring of pipelines for potential sabotage. The securitization of petroleum infrastructures has also led to increased collaboration between national and international agencies, for example between the military, police, and energy companies to protect critical infrastructure. Additionally, Norway has engaged in collaborative security measures with neighboring countries and allies. This includes coordinated patrols and information sharing to safeguard critical assets in the North Sea.

These actions reflect Norway's response to perceived threats in a tense geopolitical environment and its implications for the petroleum sector. Norway's intelligence services and other official agencies warn against a more serious threat towards Norwegian energy

infrastructures. They report ongoing mapping of vulnerabilities by Russian actors, emphasizing the need for vigilance due to Norway's role as Europe's largest gas supplier. The strategic importance of Norwegian energy supplies to Europe permeates all official threat assessments in recent years, stressing that any disruption could trigger a severe energy crisis.

#### *4.2 Weaponization of energy dependencies*

The topic of energy security has increasingly gained prominence within the EU's political discourse after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the Nord Stream sabotage (Meyer, 2024, p. 13), thus changing Norwegian authorities' threat perceptions. Yet, already in 2019, a bill published by the U.S. Congress stressed that dominant dependencies on Russian gas through Nord Stream 2 could enable Russia, through its state-owned enterprise Gazprom, to use energy as a tool of political coercion over Germany and the EU (U.S. Congress, 2019). Despite this notion of Russia's capability to weaponize petroleum energy infrastructure, this did not lead to any reconceptualizing of Norwegian national security interests at that time. This illustrates that weaponization is not exclusively sufficient to reshape what is considered a national security interest; it also has to be framed and accepted as a matter of national security through the process of securitization. It is not just businesses in the petroleum sectors that can be used as a form of weapon by foreign states. According to the official documents, other actors and sectors can be targeted by hybrid threats and used as a weapon in hybrid warfare; the power sector, electronic communications and marine technology, data center industry, and research and education are pointed out as particularly central (National Security Authority, 2024). The contemporary threat landscape characterized by hybrid threats, which is a poorly defined concept and phenomena, entails that almost anything an adversary does can be interpreted as weaponization, and thus might become a matter of security policy and a national security interest. Additionally, the expansion of Norway's Security Act to include national security interests beyond Norwegian territory has implications for what can be seen as weaponization, and thus for what can be securitized. Norway can now address threats to its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and

democratic system originating outside its borders or critical to Norway's allies regardless of location. Consequently, the jurisdiction of the Security Act may in the future be applicable to other sectors and services outside Norwegian borders, especially those critical to Norwegian allies.

#### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

This paper explores the expansion of the national security interest concept through the lenses of securitization and weaponization, both of which have played a role in framing the Norwegian petroleum sector as a matter of national security. Securitization and weaponization are distinct processes executed by different agents; weaponization involves transforming something into a weapon, while securitization refers to the framing of an issue as a national security matter following weaponization.

This article sheds light on how national security interests and security legislation change in response to external geopolitical dynamics and regional security considerations. A key learning point from the paper is that the shifting security landscape, with its emphasis on hybrid threats and great power competition, may further drive the weaponization of various sectors, potentially leading to the securitization of new industries. The new application of the Security Act is an important instrument here. It opens new avenues for the securitization of technology, various sectors, and private enterprises, which possesses new challenges to affected companies. Ultimately, this situation highlights complex dynamics between state authority and corporate interests, as well as the tension between state and industrial sovereignty.

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