

Praia energy independence

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My previous article -- Surprise! The U.S. Is Still Energy Independent -- has already generated quite a lot of feedback. Most of it was positive, but within some of the negative feedback I could tell that many people don't actually understand what energy independence means.

One person asserted that the U.S. can't be energy independent, because of skyrocketing gasoline prices. Several others argued that we can't be energy independent because we still import oil.

If energy independence means we produce more energy than we consume, then the U.S. is still energy independent per the just-released 2021 numbers from the Energy Information Administration. This is the definition that makes the most sense to me.

Since we are net exporters of coal and natural gas, if we are net exporters of petroleum and petroleum products, then we are energy independent. In fact, because of the net exports of coal and natural gas, even if we are slight net importers of oil, we would still be energy independent (which was the case in 2019). But, we were still slight net exporters of oil in 2021, and hence energy independent.

If you take energy independence to mean we can't import any oil, then the U.S. has never been energy independent and we never will be. We import a lot of oil, refine it, and then export gasoline and diesel. We also export some oil that is a better fit for foreign refineries than for our own.

Because the U.S. isn't a self-contained, isolated energy market, we are impacted by geopolitical events that affect energy flows. Shortages in the global market impact domestic prices, because we import and export oil and finished products. Thus, energy independence and energy prices are two independent factors.

In 2020, Donald Trump's last year in office, the U.S. imported 7.9 million barrels per day (BPD) of crude oil and refined petroleum products. However, we exported more than that, so we were a net exporter, and hence energy independent -- unless you believe oil imports are a disqualifier.

Thus, if you want to be consistent, then either we were still energy independent in 2021 per the net export



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definition, or we have never been energy independent (and never will be) if you assume energy independence requires the U.S. to import no oil.

While President Joe Biden has called for stepping up our transition away from fossil fuels and toward an energy system that relies more on the sun, wind, and other renewable sources, others have blamed the president for the rising prices at the pump and called on him to "say yes to American oil" or "drill, baby, drill." Some Republicans credit former President Trump with achieving "energy independence" during his presidency, because the U.S. became a net exporter of crude oil during his last year in office.

"Energy independence" is a political slogan, not an economic or technical concept with a clear definition," Campbell said in a recent interview for Reuters Fact Check. "I understand that politicians use the term 'energy independence' to imply that a country is insulated from global energy markets. However, this is rarely the case."

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