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John Paul Getty said that his formula for success was to “rise early, work hard and strike oil.” I’m not sure it was ever that easy, but it certainly is not today, especially for the international oil companies that are discovering fewer and fewer new barrels, moving into ever harsher terrain and finding the door to 80 per cent of the world’s oil reserves firmly shut.

Until last year international oil companies could at least count on dominating the list of the world’s largest listed energy groups. But in 2006 Russia’s Gazprom and PetroChina pushed their way into second and third rank behind Exxon, nudging Shell and BP to the bottom of the top five.

All of this is having consequences that can be felt far beyond the energy industry. It means that the future of the world’s economy lies in the hands of a group of opaque companies and countries that few understand.

The International Energy Agency estimates that it will take \$20 trillion of investment by 2030 to make sure enough oil, gas, power, coal, is found, produced and transported to

consumers. \$4.3 trillion will go to oil and \$3.9 trillion to gas. Whether they get invested is largely out of our hands.

By 2030 we will need 116m barrels of oil a day, rather than the 84m we consume today. In the neat, colourful charts that the organization presents it all looks quite plausible. But if you break down where that oil must come from and have been watching the BBC or CNN from time to time the picture becomes far less appealing.

The countries that will have to bear the brunt of the responsibility to meet the challenge are Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and Canada.

Setting aside Canada, whose hurdles are technical rather than political we move to the Persian Gulf.

Saudi Arabia's political future is by no means assured, given the radicalization of parts of its population and the mess the US has left on its doorstep. That mess – being Iraq, needs to increase its oil production 5 per cent each year to meet the IEA's goals. Stuck in reverse, it is hard to imagine when the country will make it into neutral, let alone first gear.

It's neighbor, Iran isn't fairing much better. In fact, every time editors at the FT ask me to write about Tehran brandishing its oil weapon by threatening to shut in production, I want to shout at them and say that the real disaster – at least in terms of oil and gas – is

that the country is stuck in diplomatic trench warfare that is causing many of its oil fields to go into decline and hindering the development of the world's biggest natural gas deposit.

So perhaps I was too prescriptive in saying that investment will depend on these countries, it will also depend on the foreign policies of Europe and especially the US.

Recent US policy has been as bad for the development of the Middle East's oil and gas reserves as it has been to the spread of democracy across the region.

Despite all the protester's angry cries of no blood for oil, politicians still don't seem to realize what oil men know: That fighting for oil is like shagging for virginity.

But not only wars get in the way of investment. This brings me to the contrasting roles of Wall Street and The City within the energy industry.

The City is almost like the Vatican – a state within a state, while on Wall Street, regulators, state attorneys, congressmen and state department officials have far more say.

In London it is the investors who ask the tough questions and where campaigners such as Greenpeace, Global Witness and Human Rights Watch have had the most success in getting energy groups to at least have to begin to tackle issues such as the environment and human rights.

Nevertheless, companies such as White Nile, which is active in Sudan, and Aminex, which does work in North Korea, manage to make their home on London's AIM market. For us journalists it makes for a far more colourful story. For Mikhail Khodorkovsky the situation is a lot less fun. Last year he watched from his jail cell as the assets of Yukos, the company he built, went public in London under Rosneft's ownership.

Meanwhile, in New York, international oil companies must deal with Ilsa (the Iran Libya sanctions act), accounting rules created by Sarbanes and Oxley, a robust Securities and Exchange Commission and Eliot Spitzer want-to-bes. Meanwhile, Washington's tentacles also stretch far with congress, for example, moving quickly to intervene when China's Cnooc tried to take over Unocal. And on America's borders immigration officials are far from easy on visitors, especially those from the Middle East, regardless whether they are businessmen seeking to strike oil deals.

All this is of course a little simplistically put. I did not intend to draw such a black and white picture, merely to raise just a small objection to Calvin Coolidge's assertion that "The chief business of the American people is business."