The United States is the world's largest energy importer, a statistic that has impacted its economy and foreign policy for decades. But is it about to become a major exporter of one type of domestic fuel?

A Houston-based company took a small, tentative step in that direction on Thursday, by saying it was working on a deal to supply liquefied natural gas from Louisiana to one of China's largest independently owned natural gas companies.

There are still hurdles. The exporter, a subsidiary of Cheniere Energy Inc. still needs a government permit to send gas to China. The Energy Department issued ...