

Security Arrangements of the Persian Gulf and the Strategic Competition of Iran and USA

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Abstract

The US Navy has had a steady presence in the Persian Gulf since the end of WWII. Following the 1979, Revolution, which overthrew the USA, backed Shah, and frightened the Arab Persian Gulf allies of Washington DC, USA, boosted its presence in the region. The first Persian Gulf War of 1991 and the second war that toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003 brought in more US troops in the region. Today, US warships patrol the waters of the Persian Gulf and the Hurmuz Straits, a place where approximately one third of the world oil supply passes through. Iran sees the presence of USA as a threat. In the past two years various reports have been published of the closeness and or the warning of Iranian Revolutionary Guard patrol boats to US ships in the Persian Gulf region, some which as well has getting big coverage's in domestic and international media, have seen the reaction of military officials of both countries (mostly from the USA). Although these reports have existed in the past too, but they have become more sensitive in the media in this particular moment in time, particularly following the Iranian nuclear agreement. In this article we attempt to take a look at the strategic completion between Iran and USA in the Persian Gulf.

Keywords: Iran, USA, Persian Gulf, balance of power, balance of security.

Introduction

Before the beginning of the European colonialism era, the Persian Gulf was a communication link between Asia, Europe and Africa, through which silk, spices and other needed goods were transported into the Mediterranean. With the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope and the flourishing of the southern African routes, in order to control the trade routes, colonialists entered the arena, and worked extensively to set up bases in the Persian Gulf, the Indian subcontinent and further in the Far East, in a way that in early 16th Century this region was first noted by the Portuguese and Spanish colonialists , and following the demise of the Portuguese naval power, for some time there was a power vacuum in the region; such a way that the governance of the region

changed hands among local powers of the Safavieh, Afsharieh and Zandieh of Iran and the rulers of Oman etc. On the other hand although European actors were involved in the power struggles and competition with local rulers, nevertheless there was a strong competition among themselves in dominating the Persian Gulf and the Hurmuz Straits, to an extent that the extent of the rivalry between the Dutch, British, French and Russians at times were drawn into local wars within Europe. But ultimately it was Britain who beat its rivals and established its rule in the region for two centuries. But in view of this history we observe that this region has been of particular importance throughout history for numerous reasons. In this article we attempt to review the contemporary aspects of the importance of this region and its effect on the relations of two important powers i.e. Iran and USA.

1 – The Characteristics of the Persian Gulf

1.1 – Persian Gulf Geopolitics

Then Assistant US Secretary of State David Newsom in a speech in 1980 said: “If the world is a flat circle and one wants to find its centre, with certainty it can be said that its centre is the Persian Gulf. Right now there is no other place this important for the continuation of the world’s economic health and stability than this centre.” (Bagheri, 2007, p31)

Since the colonialism of Britain in the 15th Century and onwards, the Persian Gulf has had significant importance for the region particularly the countries on its coasts. The current status of the Persian Gulf with its rich oil and gas reserves and also its strategic position and its value as a branch of the extraction and export of oil and industrial energy have a particular importance for the regional countries.

The geopolitical Persian Gulf region is one of the sensitive regions which since the drilling of the first well in Masjed Solaiman reached oil, it found new importance and following the end of the Second World War it became an active region with particular functions in the international order. The Persian Gulf region is affected by its surrounding geopolitical regions, and its issues is a combination of issues, forces and particular views of its surrounding and the linkage of some of these fields with intervening trans-regional forces which shape the region’s geopolitical identity (Hafeznia, 1999, p84). The Persian Gulf was situated in the Cold War geopolitical framework and before that between two territories of the internal margin (Rimland) and external margins in the theories of McIndeer and Spikeman. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the end

of the Cold War in the region, not only the geopolitical importance of the Persian Gulf was not reduced, but its importance increased on a daily basis because of the totalitarianism of one remaining world power, and brought on subsequent developments (Madani, 2006, p78)

1.2 – Persian Gulf Geo-economics

Having 565 billion barrels in oil reserves which is equal to 63 percent of the total global reserves and also 28.5 percent of gas reserves in the world, the Persian Gulf is very important and valuable, particularly for the coastal countries whose economies are based on oil and gas exports (Erdi Makin, 2012, p59).

The major goods exports of the Persian Gulf countries is oil, and their trade route goes through the Hormuz Straits and due to the use of over 5 million barrels by industrial countries, oil is exported through the Hormuz Straits to Europe, the United States, China etc. all of which have a need for industrial materials, and all Persian Gulf countries which includes Iran use the revenue raised by oil and gas sales for their economic growth, and are dependent on oil development and at times are deemed a threat for big countries. The oil dependencies among the Persian Gulf countries is to an extent that if for a period of time the region has security crisis, the coastal countries will seriously suffer as a result (Asadi, 2002, p57).

Having a very sensitive geopolitical and economic situation and being close to the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf fulfils the crucial oil needs of the industrial countries, and western and eastern beneficiary countries pay attention towards the coastal countries and preservation of stability in the region. Presently due to its oil and gas reserves which continually is the urgent need of industrial countries, the Persian Gulf has a role in the global economy and huge amounts of money pours into the region from the sale of these two commodities. The richest and most concentrated oil reserves and wells of the world are in the Persian Gulf region, to an extent that no other region of the world can compete with them. And it is for this reason that most countries of the region pay attention to the political situation of region; because if the region is inflicted with a crisis, it will cause many problems for the region and the world.

1.3 – Persian Gulf Geostrategy

The Persian Gulf region is one of the most important strategic regions of the world. Of course this is nothing new, but it has been recognised as such for centuries and accepted by all. In the recent centuries, the Persian Gulf has been witness to the presence and domination of the British colonials and also the continuation of the old and colonial policies of the Tsarist Russians, who were in pursuit of access to the warm waters of the Persian Gulf, all of which indicates its special strategic importance (Mojtahedzadeh, 2001, pp43-49).

One of the reasons for the strategic importance of the Persian Gulf is the existence of the Hormuz Straits. It is a crescent shaped passage way which connects the Persian Gulf to the Sea of Oman. These straits are one of the most important of the 11 important straits of the world which is strategically and economically very important to the superpowers and big powers of the world. The narrow breadth importance of the Hormuz Straits is such that in the three kilometres distance of the Straits, the breadth varies between 21 to 24 nautical miles. The coasts of the Straits are shared between Iran and Oman, and therefore there are international waters between the two (Jahanbin, 2005, p146). This factor has created particular sensitivity in international shipping in the Hormuz Straits, and the heavy burden of security is imposed on these two countries. For this reason Iran and Oman have special geopolitical and strategic importance (Bagheri, 2007).

2 – Iran and the United States and the Persian Gulf: before the Islamic Revolution

Following the post Second World War developments British domination of the region started weakening, to an extent where in 1968 the British government announced that in 1971 it would remove its forces from the East of the Suez Canal which included the Persian Gulf. At the time the British government gave saving costs as the reason for the removal of its forces. From this time onwards the United States has had continued presence and a role in the region's developments. During the peak of the Cold War, the prevention of the infiltration of communism in the region's countries was one of the main objectives of the United States. In this framework the Twin Pillars doctrine of Nixon in the 70s, introduced Iran and Saudi Arabia as the protectors of the region's military and economic stability (Amiri, 1994, p192).

2.1 – Nixon's Twin Pillars Doctrine

From the onset of the presidency of Richard Nixon and important role Henry Kissinger had at first as the National Security Advisor and then the Secretary of

State in guiding USA foreign policy, a new focal pointing the foreign relations of Iran and USA was created. Because on one hand Nixon as the Vice-president to Eisenhower played a key role in the 19 August 1953 coup-de-tat and returning of the Shah to power, and had established friendly relations with the Shah from back then, and on the other hand Kissinger who had taken over the helms of USA diplomacy, was one of the Shah's supporters in the region. For this reason the necessary basis for giving Iran a new role and turning it into one of the main pawn and protector of USA's interests in the region was brought about (Nazarpour, 2000, p48).

The only country that could play the role of the gendarme and security of the region was Iran. But the United States reached a conclusion that if such a role was given to Iran, it might cause a negative reaction among the Arab countries of the region. For this reason the "Twin Pillars" policy was considered by Nixon and Kissinger for the preservation of security in the Persian Gulf, and Iran and Saudi Arabia were each one of the pillars. Of course Saudi Arabia was a sparsely populated country and backwards compared to Iran, did not have a major role, and the main protection of security for small countries and oil reserves was the responsibility of Iran, because it had a well equipped and organized military. A little after the declaration of the Twin Pillars policy, the United States foreign policy regarding all important and volatile regions of the world was announced by Nixon in his speech in 1968 in Guam, which later became known as the Nixon or the Guam Doctrine (Nazarpour, 2000, pp49-53).

3 – Iran and the United States and the Persian Gulf: after the Islamic Revolution

The history of direct and aggressive conflict between the Revolutionary Guards and the US Navy dates back to the Iran-Iraq War, the most well known one of which was the Revolutionary Guards Navy commandeered by Shahid Nader Mahdavi with the US Navy during which a US helicopter was shot down and most of the Iranian forces in these operations were martyred (Fars News: 1392071600038). Furthermore, the Revolutionary Guards (during the final years of the War) by using their equipment such as mines, hit a number of navy and commercial ships that belonged to foreign governments including the United States, which became known as the "Oil Tankers War". After the passage of almost 3 decades from the end of the War, one of the few cases which is classified is the naval engagements between Iran and the United States in the Persian Gulf. Some of the instances are as follows:

First: in 2003, 4 US and 2 Kuwaiti military personnel along with their equipment and 2 boats were detained by the Revolutionary Guard Navy as they attempted to enter Alvand River. But no video clips or still images were published due to security reasons. These individuals were detained by the Guards for four days and then released. The boats were also returned to the USAns.

Second: On Friday 23 March 2007, 15 British warship HMS Cornwall marines and sailors were detained by Revolutionary Guards within Iranian waters in the northern parts of the Persian Gulf. Tensions were risen so high that then British Prime Minister directly threatened Iran. Ultimately the Revolutionary Guard Navy released the British personnel but their equipment and boat remained in Iran.

Third: In January 2016 the Revolutionary Guard Navy detained 2 USAn boats that had entered Iranian waters illegally. In this operation which took place near Farsi Islan, 10 US Marines who were equipped with light and semi-heavy weapons were detained. A little later, following many talks, Iran freed the US Marines, but the broadcasting of video and images infuriated Washington DC and the United States strongly condemned Iran's actions.

Fourth: Confrontation of 7 Iranian speedboats with a US coastal patrol boat and the aircraft carrier USS Eisenhower in the Persian Gulf. US officials have said that Iranian boats moved directly towards USS Firebolt, in such way that the USAns were forced to change directions within 100 yards.

Fifth: One Iranian speedboat approached two US navy ships and one Kuwaiti navy ship, one of which was USS Squall which after a brief radio communication with the Iranians, and their refusal to leave the area, three warning shots were fired towards the Iranian boat. The US Department of Defence declared that the Iranian boat had approached the USAn and Kuwaiti boats at high speed to within approximately 300 yards (around 180 metres).

In 2015 there were 22 instances of critical confrontation of USAns and Iranian ships. But these confrontations have increased within the first six months of the current year from the total confrontations of all the previous years, and reached 31 with the recent confrontation. In other words in 2016 there has been an

approximate 50 percent increase. The simple answer is that the security arrangements of the Persian Gulf are changing.¹

4 – Balance of Power in the Persian Gulf and its result

Iran and United States competition in the region is in fact over the taking control of the security of the Persian Gulf, which without a doubt the implementation of the will of Iran in the region will annoy the USAns, and they have shown this dissatisfaction in various ways. But these changes will not be accepted simply. We must see from the theoretic aspects what characteristics these security changes have had, and in which direction they go. The main view of the western world, particularly the United States and the Arab world is that the stress on the balance of power contains the preservation of stability and security in the Persian Gulf. But we must see how correct this perception is and what have its conclusions been? With a look at the history of the developments of the region, we can consider the results of the balance of power in the region in the following instances:

1 – The Iran-Iraq war was the result of this system, because after the Iranian Revolution and the souring of Iran-USA relations, the military forces of Iran and Iraq had to be destroyed.

2 – The military and political support of Saddam Hussein by big powers resulted in Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, which subsequently brought the legitimacy of the Arab conservative governments in the region under question.

3 – The rise in extremism and terrorism of Al-Qaeda in a way is the result of the direct presence of US political, military and economic systems of USA in the region, and efforts to put to question Arab governments.

Overall from within the concentration of balance of power the rise in the arms race, the direct presence of foreign armies and the formation of new security puzzles, the dependence of regional Arab governments to USA's security umbrella and overall the creation of tension, competition, mistrust and war have come out in the relations of the governments of the region (Motaghi, 2010, pp262-263).

Considering the abovementioned points, it seems that this system has failed.

¹ Confrontation between Iran and the United States in the Persian Gulf is taken from Fars News report of 3 decades of naval confrontations between Iran and the United States in the Persian Gulf. Fars News, news code: 13950620000820

4.1 – Reasons for the system’s failure

- *Centrality of Conflicts: the balance of power based political-security system in the Persian Gulf region is designed with a focus on traditional threats among governments during the Cold War and the particular conditions of the 1970s, 80s and 90s and with a lean to the demands and interests of trans-regional players and their regional allies. Such a system stresses on “conflicts” and “disputes”, and therefore in nature, be it traditional or modern, it is the origin of insecurity and in practice in view of the occurrence of new geopolitical changes following the Iraq crisis, it does not have the ability to be realised in the traditional form in the region.*
- *The Challenges of the Traditional Form of Balance of Power: the swapping of roles and success of the regional and trans-regional powers following the Iraq crisis and its regional effects, brings to challenge the possibility of balance of power in the traditional form. With the fall of the Baathist system, it is not possible to establish a new balance of power between Iran and Iraq. The new changes in the power and political structure in Iraq, such as the institutionalisation of the role and power of the Shia and Kurds has resulted in the redefining of the make-up of power and the establishment of a form of balance in Iraq, in a way that the possibility of Iraq moving towards extremism and militarisation against Iran has lessened. The two countries have even extensively tried to establish closer relation and create a coalition in the region.*
- *New Powers: The outcome of USA’s wars in the region has been the appearance of new geopolitical developments and redefining of the role and power of the regional players. Meanwhile, Iran and Turkey as the two major powers of the region have become key as a result of USAn policies in the region, and the future of the Middl East in away is dependent on the level of their play and roles (Mahpishanian, 2011, pp30-35).*

5 – New Security System: Balance of Security

The lack of the balancing force of Iran in the Persian Gulf will easily increase the role of USA in the Persian Gulf, and the clashes of these two countries was the result of this role increase. USA was forced to enter the arena as balance against Iran. USA’s wars in the region fundamentally have changed the political, security power and also the role of the regional players. The strengthening of the role of the Shia in Iraq, the Syrian crisis and even Yemen have had serious effects on the increase of Iran’s regional role and reduction of

the roles of Saudi Arabia and Israel. The post-Iranian nuclear deal atmosphere shows that new security ratios between Iran and USA are being shaped. The increase of clashes between Iran and USA in the last two years in the Persian Gulf is one of the most important signs of this trend.

Iran and USA are two key regional and trans-regional players who have the ability and potential to direct military operations in the Persian Gulf and formation of political-security coalitions in the region. In this framework, the elimination of Iran's security threat is the most important factor for the creation of stability and cooperation of Iran in the region. Most of Iran's policies in the Persian Gulf region is in reaction to USA's security threat. On this basis, the interconnected strategy, in the Iranian defence strategy which is on the basis of creation of any form of insecurity for Iran will mean insecurity for the region, is the reaction towards continued US military threat against the Islamic Republic of Iran (Barzegar, 2010).

This strategy is based on the "preventive" theme, and "aggressive defense" through active presence in regional political-security developments, which has been successful to-date. If the security threat of Iran is removed, the foreign policy of Iran will be based on entry into a win-win game and expansion of its regional role in the framework of accepting the role of other regional and trans-regional players.

Conclusion

The traditional form of balance of power between Iran and Iraq while bringing security for the region's Arab countries, will also provide the outside players, USA in particular. On this basis the "dual containment" theory which simultaneously targeted both Iran and Iraq, and the "axis of evil" theory as an alternative theory to dual containment, which considered Iran as the main axis of insecurity, have in a way come out of the balance of power's heart. Ultimately the balance of power was the balance of power between Iran and Iraq in the traditional form. The supporters of this mentality believe that at the same time as the fall of the Baath system and the disruption of balance of power in Iran's favour, the establishment of a new form of balance of power to balance Iran's role and subsequently the provision of security for the region is vital. The United States has tried to play such a role following its failed redefining of the new Iraq in the form of new balance of power. Subsequently USA's continued efforts to minimise the role of Iran in the form of new balance of power, itself has resulted in the appearance of a new security puzzle in the

Persian Gulf. Thus from the start of the Iraq crisis back in 2003, the uninterrupted battle of Iran and USA has been for the “establishment of new roles” in the Persian Gulf. In other words, what is an increase in security and provision of national security for USA, simultaneously for Iran is deemed as the reduction security and damages to its national security. In view of these new conditions, the balance of power has tilted in favour of Iran. Iraq is no longer a traditional and strategic enemy of Iran, and will be Iran’s friend and possible future ally. In Syria, Iran is cooperating closely with Russia, and in Yemen and Bahrain has security claims too. For this reason the need for the use of role of regional players and competitor such as Iran and attention to interpretations based on socio-political and cultural realities of the region is unavoidable. Even the nuclear agreement can be deemed as the result of changes in security views. These conditions have made the redefining of the new political-security structures of the Persian Gulf region, and its focus is based on the redefining of Iran’s role as it were the so-called source of “insecurity” in the region and acceptance of the regional role of Iran in view of the existing political-security realities by USA. As mentioned even the nuclear deal can be studied from this aspect, meaning that in fact it was a contract for the recognition of the new role of Iran in the security system of the region. It is certain that the power limits of this role depend on the bargaining power and pressure levers which both sides possess. In this eve, this strategic competition will result in an increase in Iran’s role in the Persian Gulf.

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