INTRODUCTION

Conflict and Cooperation in Persian Gulf is not, as a matter of fact, one of the several aspects of the regional and international politics in this region. Rather, it is the best possible and the most succinct illustration of these. Since the emergence of this region into an international sub-system, i.e. after the withdrawal of the British forces east of Suez in 1971 and with the imposition of oil embargo in 1973, politics in, of and about the region can conveniently be described as that of conflict and cooperation.

It was in fact, the British withdrawal which set in motion these two forces. As many as seven sheikdoms decided to unite into a single sovereign unit, but not without two sheikdoms viz., Qatar and Bahrain, backtracking from the process of the integration of the smaller sheikdoms. If those who are now the constituents of the UAE set aside border disputes and dynastic-cum-tribal rivalries among themselves in an appreciable display of cooperation, Qatar and Bahrain opted out of it mainly because they could not overcome these very traditional rivalries that existed between them.

The British presence may have not laid the foundation of intra-regional cooperation but it did prevent innumerable disputes among its protectorates from escalating, beside thwarting an Iraqi attempt to occupy Kuwait or parts of it. There existed the Iran-Iraq boundary dispute and the one over fomenting of internal discontentment in each other's territories while the two countries were independent of British influence in the region. But these were typically bilateral issues as the rest of the region remained insulated from them. Needless to point out, these very disputes had a far wider implications for other regional countries after the British withdrawal. Beside, the British withdrawal was followed by the Iranian occupation of three islands of the UAE, which was not only the first major case of regional conflict so far as it set in the big power-small power dichotomy in the region, but it was also an indication of conflagration of the regional disputes which were by and large low keyed till then.

However, regional cooperation was not entirely missing in the years immediately following the British withdrawal. What probably distinguishes the Persian Gulf from other regions is that conflict and cooperation have gone hand in hand there. Imposing the 1973 oil embargo, regional countries displayed that the unity on common issues comes into force transcending existing disputes. Even Iran, which did not join the countries who had imposed arms embargo, led them from the front to see the oil prices quadruple.

Thus, common history, the Arab character, religious bonds and similarity of political systems have bound the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf into a cooperating unit. But these have not turned the region into a conflict-free zone either, at various occasions the vicissitudes and compulsions of modern day inter-state politics have diminished the unifying role of traditional forces. This is what is the paradox of conflict and cooperation which the region is beset and blessed with.

As the traditional uniting forces have begun diminishing, the 20th century compulsions of maintaining peaceful bilateral relations have come in as the factors behind inter-state cooperation, that at least
prevents the militarization of the regional disputes. Of course, the region has witnessed the two most important wars—one being the longest in the ensuing century and the later the most devastating as well as more aptly called a World War in terms of the number of the participating countries—yet one can note that most of the disputes, which are countless, in the region have not turned into full fledged wars. Utmost, the disputes among those Arab Peninsular countries who are the part of the Persian Gulf region, have turned into border skirmishes that too few and far in between.

Interestingly, the expediency to act as group particularly to deal with the common regional threat and the outside world has given birth to regional and institutionalized cooperation—the GCC. To an extent, regional cooperation preceded the formation of the GCC. It existed in an uninstitutionalised form in spheres of commerce, communication, oil, technology, education etc. in the 70s and paved the way for the formation of this regional organization. Also, the GCC is not the only platform for regional cooperation. The member-state of the GCC have formed a cartel in OPEC as well in OAPEC.

GCC has not enforced an ideal state of cooperation among the member states. But no other regional organizations, more so the international organizations, have succeeded in achieving the utopia. This because none of these happen to be supranational. Therefore, when the national interest come in direct clash with regional interests, the former prevails. Be it noted that the national interest of each country is the main determinant in the setting up of a regional organization by the concerned countries. So giving it precedence over regional interests is the obvious choice to a member-state.

Thus the importance of the GCC as a successful instrument of regional cooperation must be seen in whatever little it has achieved and not in its failures. Does not the GCC represent the finest example, and probably the first, of politico-military protectionism, albeit with external help if the EEC is an example of economic protectionism?

Yet, the cooperation in the region has not been able to end the conflicts in the region. Thus, the GCC member-states have not fond out a mechanism to resolve disputes among themselves for once and all. They have not made even a single serious effort in this direction. Of a few disputes, the GCC has succeeded in resolving, were brought to it only when they threatened to go out of control, endangering regional security as well as the existence of the GCC. This makes one conclude that there is a lack of will to resolve the existing disputes. This, also points to the fact that there exists no understanding to prevent the disputes among the member states from turning into a crisis.

Conflicts in the Persian Gulf are typically regional. The need to mention this point arises out of the fact that in their penchant for examining every Third World conflict from the prism of Superpower confrontation learned scholars (not all of them), have overlooked this phenomenon. Thus if the superpowers deliberately stayed away from influencing the course of border disputes, particularly in the Arab peninsula region, they tried and failed to influence the course of the Iran-Iraq war or the Persian Gulf crisis. They simply managed to read just their
policies towards the neutral countries, the belligerents and each other vis-a-vis the situation created by the Iran-Iraq war. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait turned into a war between the US and its allies on one side and Iraq on the other only when the latter could not force Saddam Hussein to withdraw from Kuwait, yet another example of a superpower's failure to influence the course of a crisis. It is held that US wanted to wage a war against Iraq from day one to an extent that it had indirectly prodded Saddam to invade Kuwait. But was not Saddam's refusal to withdraw more the result of sheer miscalculation than the success of the US strategy to lure him into fighting a war?

The conflicts in the Persian Gulf have been very much regional in nature not only because the superpowers played absolutely no role in their eruption and a limited role in ending them but also because these disputes have stemmed from a combination of the regional history, geography (physical set up) and ideologies. The wars in particular in the region have been the results of regional ambitions of the aggressor country.

It is in this perspective this research work is being carried out. It tries to identify the causes and the characteristics of regional disputes/war, the nature and extent of the superpowers involvement in these and the undercurrents of regional cooperation. Frankly, it must be admitted that this work does not qualify to be called a 'research' in so far as it does not look into the issues pertaining to the regional cooperation and conflict from a new angle. It claims to be a research work on the basis that it reviews the existing literature on the subject matter and infers some conclusions which substantiate some of the existing perceptions on the subject matter and beg to differ from some of these.

Nor is this work a 'micro-research', which a true research work must be. The topic of this work and the period covered make it imperative to discuss such a large variety of issues that a 'micro research' could be conducted only by ignoring some vital issues. Part of the reason in not conducting a micro-research lies in the fact that such a work, as the researcher has observed, tends to become more enumerative than analytical. However, the researcher does not intend to take recourse in the above-mentioned argument to shroud his shortcomings, if any, of not enumerating an event.

The researcher has often indulged in repetition of a particular fact and argument in more than one chapter. When each chapter in a research work is treated as a single unit while all of them are inter-linked, the repetitions are bound to occur. However, undue repetitions, if any, is entirely the fault of the researcher.

Last but not the least, if history is actually the autobiography of historians, a research work in political science, particularly in the branch of international politics, is also the reflection of the researcher's personality. Thus, like the Behaviouralists, this researcher does not claim to have produced a value-free study.