CHAPTER II
SUPERPOWERS AND THE PERSIAN GULF CONFLICTS

Conflicts in the Persian Gulf haven’t been the replica of the Cold War as the most of Third World ones during the 70s and the 80s are described as and understood to be. The superpowers, or either of the two, played, directly or indirectly, a limited role in abetting a conflict in the Persian Gulf crisis being an exception. More than confronting each other the superpowers cooperated during the two major wars which have been fought in the region since the 1970 and did not always end up supporting the rival sides.

But this does not mean that the superpowers and their relations remained unaffected by the conflicts in the Persian Gulf region. These conflicts told upon their respective policies towards the region as well as their bilateral relations.

This chapter looks into the various facets of the respective policies of the superpowers on regional conflicts.

THE UNITED STATES AND THE REGIONAL CONFLICTS

The United States’ approach to the regional conflicts has been pegged to its overall policy objectives in the region. Thus the containment of the Soviet Union, consolidation of political and strategic leverage in the region, security of and stability of the allies, the security of Israel, the national security and the oil have constituted the main undercurrents and contours of US policy.

THE POLICY

CONSOLIDATION OF LEVERAGE:

This explains the United States pre-occupation with the regional crises. On the one hand, regional conflicts threatened to restrict US political influence, if the Soviet Union exploited the opportunity to come to the rescue of either of the sides at disputes or if these resulted into the emergence of regional power. On the other hand, these crises came as an opportunity to the US to demonstrate itself as a credible, reliable and a long-term security partner of the allies (1). This is why on every such occasion, the United States has taken it as its unilateral duty to protect its allies. However, the scope to play this role has been dependent on the magnitude of the threat to the allies and US interests in the region.

In the case of the Iran-Iraq War, since the Persian Gulf States were not directly involved and the US did not want that any of its actions caused Iran to attack them militarily-weaker states of the Arabian Peninsula, the US limited its role to guarantee an 'over-the-horizon' security to the allies, to shore up their military build-up and to intimidate Iran of grave consequences if it tried to drag its allies into the war.
However, the Persian Gulf crisis did not only threaten the annihilation of one of the US allies, Kuwait, and Iraqi control over the 50 percent of the world oil reserves, but it erupted at a time when the US, in the absence of the Soviet challenge, could exploit the situation to establish its hegemony throughout the world. Thus, unlike as in the Iran-Iraq war, the US took part in the Persian Gulf crisis. The Iraqi defeat at its hands was seen to serve US domination of the region too. The prospect of defeating Iraq could have replaced the Saddam regime by a Pro-American one. At least, it would have subverted a regional threat and turned it into a docile power.

In the 1980s, the US responses to the Persian Gulf crises by and large met its objectives. The Arab allies came to tune their foreign policies to the US interests in the region, reflected in the eschewing of their opposition to the US policy of Israel during the Iran-Iraq War, uninterrupted flow of oil at palatable price to the US and its Western allies from the region and a discreet approval to the US naval deployment beside some strategic facilities.

However, the US hegemony was not absolute. The Arab allies were less receptive to those US interests which clashed with their interests. This was reflected in the allies' giving inactive support to the US Middle East peace attempts, their unwillingness, to an extent the refusal, not give the US the strategic access the way the latter wished and expressing their worries about the US naval presence in the Persian Gulf.

In the post-Persian Gulf war era, the US geo-political presence in the region is far more formidable than ever. The allies now do not have any inhibition in providing the US strategic facilities. Nor do they rebuke an overt security cooperation, as they did in the 80s, with the US. This is, of course, a different matter that incidentally the US now may not be interested in forming a formal strategic grouping in the region due to the fact that the rationale behind such a security grouping is serves no purpose nowadays as there is no global and regional power to contain or compete with.

The Persian Gulf allies have welcomed the PLO-Israeli Accord which is being supported and supervised by the US, despite vehemently opposing a peace proposal—Camp David Agreement—of similar nature not long ago and despite the fact that one of the signatories to the accord—the PLO—had turned an enemy to them for its support to Iraq during the Persian Gulf crisis. Thus, among the many factors responsible for the change in these countries' perception of the Middle East Peace, the most discernible one is their compulsion to accommodate US interests in gratitude to its role in liberating Kuwait and stalling the possible escalation of the Iraqi invasion.

With the Soviet Union no more on the scene not only as an adversary but also as a country and its successor, Russia's, unwillingness and incapability to challenge the US in the region, the US hegemony in the region is for the time being firmly established. This factor has also deprived the regional allies of the clout over the US i.e. playing one superpower against the other.

How long would the US hegemony last in the region is a matter of debate. The crushing
defeat of Iraq by the US can restrain the powers, like Iran, from aspiring for regional supremacy. But the case may be exactly opposite also. The irony is that the defeat of Iraq did not culminate into the toppling of the Saddam regime and its substitution by a pro-American regime. Even it did not reduce Iraq to a docile power. Charles William Maynes sums up the US dilemma as “Iraq will still be located where it is, will still possess its large oil resources and will still harbor the regional aspirations that recent Iraqi government has developed. If Iraq is destroyed, Iran and Syria will become more serious security problems” (4).

One may point out that if Iraq continues to remain a regional threat to the US allies it would serve the US interests by containing the tendency among their allies to become independent of the US on security issues. However, the point to be pondered here is that would the US repeat what it did about three and half years ago if a similar crisis recurs in the Persian Gulf region. Getting financially squeezed day by day, the US treasury will not permit Washington to play such role. And the erstwhile allies might not be always willing to support and finance the next American military adventure. There may be little domestic support for another outsized and expensive American crusade.

THE AMERICAN SECURITY:

Ensuring the security of the allies during a regional conflict has been directly related to the American security (5). For any extraordinary regional development resulting from US recklessness is bound to diminish Washington’s political influence, which constitutes an integral part of the its security in the region, and can, probably, lead to the dismantling of the strategic facilities it enjoys in the region.

Giving its security a precedence over all other considerations, the US has not discounted even taking on its allies. This was demonstrated when the US officially threatened to take military action in case of the “strangulation” of oil supplies to it during the 1973 oil embargo. The unofficial calls to use force was even at an upbeat (6).

The US reaction to the two Persian Gulf wars was guided by the security factor as much as by the other factors. Though apparently the US regional security doctrine, called “Strategy Consensus”, floated in Spring 1981, aimed at constituting a geo-political grouping to contain the Soviet Union, it must have been mooted by the US on the presumption that in the wake of the Iranian threats the regional states would welcome it (7). During the Iran-Iraq War, the US aim was to intensify the military cooperation with the Persian Gulf allies. Accordingly, the US received from Qatar storage facilities for weapons, lubricants, jet Fuel and medicine. Bahrain provided it port call and naval mooring facilities. Exchange of information with Saudi Arabia increased and Kuwait went for additional arms purchases from it (8).

During the Persian Gulf War II, the US sole objective was to destroy Iraq militarily and economically. The economic embargo against that country was imposed considering that 95 percent of its foreign exchange came through the oil exports. The outlet of Iraqi oil exports could easily be stopped by the US by blockading oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz or and through Jordan while its two allies, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, were there to close down the oil
pipelines from Iraq. Even then, the US was pre-determined to fight Iraq. For, it knew, sanction could erode Iraq economically and the quality of its military. But the possibility of Iraq continuing as a regional heavy-weight, a chemical weapon power and a country on nuclear threshold, could have always existed. Thus, the war with Iraq, which was destined to serve a number of other important objectives as well— destruction of its military strength, its dismemberment and the removal of Saddam Hussein — was viewed as better option in the interests of the US global security.

That the US has decided to continue economic embargo against Iraq and it has activated the UN to dismantle Iraqi nuclear and chemical weapons facilities demonstrates that the single most important objective at work is to reduce the Iraqi determination and ability to defy US security in the region.

The US policy towards the wars in the Persian Gulf region has not served all of its security interests. The ‘Strategic Consensus’ proposal was rejected by the allies. Though faced with the Soviet threat, the US allies could not be persuaded to cooperate with two main constituents of the proposed consensus; Egypt—with which they had severed diplomatic ties—and Israel—with which they were officially at war. As regards the US-Persian Gulf military cooperation, the facilities the US was extended fell short of US aspirations and was no match to its commitment to the allies security.

The US military action against Iraq served its security interests by not only bruising Iraq but also as a warning to the others in the region, particularly Iran. But it has also made it obligatory upon the US to resort to similar action in the region and elsewhere to punish an aggressor in the future. Failure on this count would give a big jolt to the US control over the regional security system. It is hardly expected that the US will always be in a position to send 5,00,000 troops to stop an aggression.

SECURITY OF THE ALLIES:

The security of allies has been the key to the US policy towards the regional conflicts. During the Iran-Iraq War the security of Saudi Arabia—which was envisioned by the US as a substitute for the fallen Shah and a bulwark against Soviet expansion and ambitions in the region—became paramount to the US, as writes Perlmutter Amos “Saudi Arabia has become a key Gulf state in the vision that passes for the US Middle East policy. Like Berlin, it has taken on aspects of piece of US real estate; like Berlin the US will defend Riyadh”(9).

Thus the Reagan administration removed all barriers, put up by Carter, in the way of the US arms supplies to the region. The sale of the AWACs to Saudi Arabia in June 1984 was aimed more at intimidating Iran from spreading the war than deterring the Soviet Union(10).

The US official neutrality towards the Iran-Iraq War did not indicate any lack of commitment towards the allies’ security. In Fact, the US commitment worked as deterrence on Iran that by engaging the Arab Gulf states in the war it should not risk to pitch itself against a far stronger power with a formidable navel force in the region, the US(11). Throughout the war,
the US maintained a high-profile presence in the Persian Gulf waters which with the receding of the Soviet threat came to be directed against Iran. The US even encouraged the Persian Gulf states to repulse Iranian attack when and if it came, assuring them of its direct involvement in such a scenario. Thus, when Kuwait, in 1986, requested for the protection of its ships from the Iranian attack, the US agreed to though a little bit belatedly. A short of war conflict that subsequently got underway between the US and Iran showed that the former was never indifferent to take on Iran for the sake of the allies' security.

Needless to say that the security of allies was one of the underlying factors behind the US decision to go to a war against Iraq. This can be gauged from the fact that not only was the liberation of Kuwait the major objective of the US but it wanted to restore the Al-Sabah family to power as no regime other than Sabhas in that country would have been totally beholden to it. The US resolve to bring back Sabahs to power was in sharp contrast to US inconsistency in this other cases. It has not insisted that the former Cambodian government must return to power. It has also not insisted that the Afghan government, which the Soviets overthrew, be re-installed.

THE SECURITY OF ISRAEL:

The regional conflicts have come in handy for Washington to defuse Arab opposition to its Israeli Policy. The US has used the arms supplies and its security commitments to the allies as an instrument to diminish the latter's opposition to the US-Israeli relations. An eight-year war in the region and the resultant increase in the dependence of the regional Arab countries on the US caused a proportionate decline in their ability to influence US policy on Arab-Israeli issue.

This is not to say that the US support to allies in the conflicts was reciprocated in form of the latter's support to the US Middle East peace policy. The US success on this front, in fact, was that the differences over the Palestinian issue did not mar Washington's close military, political and economic cooperation with the Arab States of the Persian Gulf. The two actors reached an understanding on not to let their conflicting perceptions of the Palestinian Issue becoming an irritant in their bilateral relations.

But this was done not without the US accommodating Arab concerns. It chose Saudi Arabia and not Israel as the regional policeman after the downfall of the Shah although Israel was more reliable, politically stable, and militarily stronger ally in comparison to Saudi Arabia to clinch this role. The US policy makers held that Israel as a regional policeman would be unacceptable to Arab Gulf states all and sundry. The US pressure on the allies to accept Israel in the role of the policeman of the Persian Gulf could have stirred internal rebellion against the Persian Gulf monarchies.

The US also adopted a balanced stand on the Palestinian Problem, such as advocating for Palestinian autonomy within Israel. Compared to the US view of the future of Palestine in the preceding three decades, the US proposal for Palestinian autonomy under the Camp David agreement, 1978, marked a pro-Palestinians change in US policy although it was seen throughout the Arab world as just opposite.
However, in the Persian Gulf crisis the US exploited Arab dependence on it to foil Saddam’s ploy to link Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait to that of Israel from the occupied territories(13). In fact, the security of Israel was one of the objectives of US war against Iraq(14) in so far as the American objective to destroy Iraqi chemical and nuclear facilities aimed at preventing Iraq from emerging into another nuclear power, beside Israel, in West Asia(15).

OIL:

The ‘oil’ has consistently determined the US policy towards regional conflicts. When the Iran-Iraq war began in 1980, the US had all the reasons to take interests in the war as it had threatened to ensue the ‘Third Oil Shock’, which could have been caused by the stoppage of oil supplies from the combatants as well as the non-combatants in the region(16).

However, since the oil supplies, as expected, were not disrupted as the world-wide recession accentuated and, as a result, from 1981 the oil imports from Arab countries reduced remarkably, for instance from 31 percent in 1973 to 7 percent in 1983 in US total imports(17), the Iran-Iraq War only marginally affected the US(18). Dangers to the supply of the little amount of oil the US imported, also diminished as the closure of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran became a distant possibility after the latter was told to face US retaliation in such an eventuality. Iran also lacked the means to launch air strike on a scale necessary to cause extensive damage to Saudi and Kuwaiti oil installations (19).

Yet, the oil continued to figure as an important factor in the US policy of preventing the Iranian victory. The US administration noted that an Iranian victory would give Tehran a commanding position in the Persian Gulf, enabling it to intimidate Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to stick to price and production discipline. Furthermore, despite the decline in oil imports from the Persian Gulf region, the US still required access to Persian Gulf oil. The Persian Gulf states were an export market worth tens of billions of dollars. It was, therefore, in the interest of the US and other industrialized countries that the Persian Gulf governments handled their considerable foreign exchange holdings in a manner that will not disrupt currency markets. For this a constant flow of oil in whatever amount became essential.

The fear of Long term disruptions, and resultant panic-buying, skyrocketing of prices in spot markets also retained US interests in the war as it was not ready see the complacency of the 1975-78 period repeated. Such a scenario was inevitable in the case of total disruption of oil supplies from the Persian Gulf region. For this would have increased the burden on the non-OPEC sources where oil production was costlier, and caused depletion in the oil stockpiled(20). Europe’s and Japan’s vulnerability to the Persian Gulf oil reduced marginally only in comparison to that of the US during the war. Thus, a disruption in Persian Gulf oil flow to these regions was bound to affect negatively the economies of the US key trade partners. The US disinterest in the Persian Gulf oil, while West Europe’s continued dependence on it would have put the NATO solidarity in jeopardy.
As far as the Persian Gulf crisis is concerned, “many commentators believed”, in the words of Maynes, “the simply mentioning the word “oil” was enough to explain American deployment in the Gulf”(21). That area contains more than the two-thirds of the worlds’ known petroleum reserves and it is in the interests of the US and the oil consuming states from West Europe that no single state gains control of the whole area. This strategy was central to the US decision to go to war against Iraq. The purpose was partly met in the early days of the crisis when the US deployed enough force to deter an Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia. Yet, Iraq’s control of Kuwaiti oil and the absence of those two countries’ oil from the international market caused extraordinary price hike. To leave Kuwait in Iraqi possession would have meant that the then oil-prices would not stabilize at a time the Persian Gulf oil would regain eminence in the global supply. Thus US decided to eject the Iraqi Kuwait out of Kuwait through military action, even though an threat to price and supply of oil tended to come true as a result very war the US was threatening to unleash to abort Iraqi occupation of a huge amount of oil reserves and the daily production in Kuwait. The Iraqis had mined the Kuwaiti oil wells and if faced with the prospects of defeat, they were to blow it off. Iraq was expected to destroy Saudi and other Persian Gulf States’ oil facilities by missile or air attack also(22).

However, it is difficult to asses that whether Iraq’s will to intimidate the neighboring oil producing states has dampened or not after its defeat. But, its military strength is still a threat to reckon with to Saudi Arabia and more so to smaller states. So the liberation of Kuwait would have brought the oil market back to normalcy but the virtual threat—a regional state’s control of and influence on the price and supply of oil—has not ceased to exist.

The United States vested interests lies in preventing Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Iran from acquiring enough military strength to pose a serious threat to the international oil market. This needs constructive control on arms shipment to the area. The USA has failed on this count. It was the largest arms supplier to region in previous two years. Its arms supplies to the region in the last couple of years surpass all the previous record. So would be the case as the arms deals bound to take place in the coming years materialise. Even if the US wants to check arms proliferation in the region, it can not do it all alone. There would be China, France, Brazil and Germany who, allured by the prospects of vast commercial benefits, would readily agree to fill the vacuum.

THE SOVIET FACTOR:

In the 70s, the United States was in an advantageous position vis-a-vis the Soviet Union in the Persian Gulf. For the threat from the other superpower was limited to its ability to aid and abet radical movements in the Arabian peninsula, which, except in Oman, were not that awesome. Whereas Iraq, the only pro-Soviet Union state in the region, was not a potential source of undermining US position in the Persian Gulf given its (Iraq’s) relatively far weaker military prowess than that of its adversary and the US most formidable ally, Iran.

However, the situation changed dramatically at the fag end of the 70s. The success of Islamic revolution in Iran, as perceived the policy makers in the US, stimulated the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan(23). As says Harris, “the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghani-
stan was a venture which probably could have not occurred before the Iranian revolution" (24).

Then came the Iran-Iraq War. It was seen by the US policy makers as an opportunity to the Soviet Union to expand southward to gain control of the oil by extending military support to Iran against its own ally, Iraq. It was also presumed that the Persian Gulf states would instead of resisting the USSR cooperate with it. The Soviet threat was real. Its troops and planes in Afghanistan, which could be stationed in southern Afghanistan to bring the Strait of Hurmuz within the striking range, its fleet in the Indian Ocean and its foothold in South Yemen and Ethiopia vested the USSR with the capability to execute such plan(25).

Thus the US responded to the Iran-Iraq War through the Soviet prism. The Carter doctrine, proclaimed on January 23, 1980 in the President’s State of Union message, which threatened to repel an outside military aggression in the Persian Gulf region through military action if necessary(26), was meant against the Soviet movement into the area on behalf of Iran. Creation of Rapid Deployment Force, the proposing of Strategic consensus plan (27), supply of AWACs and other equipment to Saudi Arabia were the logical extension of the Carter doctrine and were pegged to the Soviet as well as the Iranian threats, the former to the US and the latter to its allies(28).

It was only by threatening Soviet union of dire consequences if it participated in the war alongside Iran, the US entered a dialogue with the Soviet Union on practicing neutrality in the war by both of them. Also, the US did not want to provoke the Soviet Union until it was engaged in securing release of its diplomatic officials held as hostages by Iran(29). During those days the US strategy was to minimize the Soviet influence in Iraq. Although US did not have diplomatic relations with Iraq it used the network of French, German and Japanese ties and commercial connections with Iraq to wean Baghdad away from Moscow. The US, therefore, is said to have specially told the its West European allies to provide arms and ammunition Iraq needed to fight the war.

According to some observers the Soviet threat led the US to appease Iran in the initial years of the war. In case of the war with the USSR the logistic support from Iran would have been of immense help. The US administration wanted that Iran, at least, remained neutral in such a war(30).

That the Islamic Republic of Iran did not join the Soviet bloc came as relief to the US. The US did not make any attempt to topple the Khoemeini regime and install a US-friendly government to regain its influence in a country bordering the USSR (31). Washington also opposed Iran’s dismemberment resulting from an Iraqi victory and indicated that it will not tolerate Iraq’s permanent retention of Iranian territories. The US policy makers thought that in these circumstances the Soviet Union would try to come closer to Iraq shedding its differences with that country. After all, this would be not be a difficult task for the USSR as the two countries were tied by treaty of Friendship and cooperation, the US policy makers viewed.

The USSR would have taken the political change in Iran as a net loss to it by rendering a sensitive and exposed sector of the Soviet periphery less secured. At this jucture the USSR
could come to the rescue of Iran, who would have welcome it as the only way out to save itself from Iraq. The US military officials also did not discount that in such an eventuality the Soviet might have intervened in the name of the Soviet-Iranian Friendship Treaty of 1923, which was considered valid by the USSR despite its rejection by Iran.

Well, the US did directly intervene in the war on behalf of Kuwait by reflagging its ships endangered by Iran’s Silkworm missile attack. The Soviet factor was central in prompting the US to come to Kuwait’s rescue. Washington had initially vacillated when Kuwait approached it. It decided to entertain the Kuwaiti request only when it was known that Soviet Union had leased three tankers to Kuwait sailing under Red flag and guarded by the Soviet navy. Fearing, thereby, political encroachment in its sphere of influence by the USSR, the US administration quickly moved and in March of 1987 placed eleven Kuwaiti tankers under US Navy’s escort.

The US agreed to escort the Kuwaiti ships as by doing so the chances of a direct confrontation with the USSR were unlikely as the latter had itself agreed to protect the Kuwait Ships against Iran. In the ensuing skirmishes with Iran, the US did not try to spread its military operation to the Iranian lands in these circumstance these security concerns could have forced the USSR to abandon its ‘neutrality’ to US-Iran clashes.

The United States viewed the toppling of the conservative Arab regimes as the main objective of the Soviet activism in the Middle East(33). In the light of this, the US evolved its relations with the Persian Gulf countries, avoiding to look to close to them lest it brew resentment among the people of the region, opening the gate for greater activism on the part of the USSR.

Later on, the USSR withdrew its support from the weak and unorganized political movements and moved to establish government-to-government level relations with the regional countries. But this did not end the US ordeal as this move of the Soviet Union was interpreted as an encroachment in the its sphere of influence. The US took a series of steps to outmaneuver the Soviet Union. These steps included large scale economic and military assistance to, and increasing intelligence, information and propaganda activities in, the region.

How far the US succeeded is difficult to assess. It prevented the Soviet Union from expanding southward, it is said. But did the USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan intend so. Most probably it did not. First of all, the Soviet Union knew that expansion beyond Afghanistan would result into a direct confrontation with the US, given the vital geo-strategic importance of the region to the latter. Therefore, whether the Carter doctrine would have been invoked or not or the Iran-Iraq War would have taken place or not, the Soviet Union could not commit the mistake of getting entangled into a direct and nuclear war with the US by extending beyond Afghanistan. Second, the Persian Gulf oil was not vital to the Soviet Union to meet its domestic requirements of oil and denying the US access to it. It was later proved that Soviet Union was self-sufficient in oil. It might have needed the Persian Gulf oil to use it for itself and sell domestically produced oil, which was costlier, to the oil importing countries. But this policy did not require seizure of the Persian Gulf oil. Instead the USSR could buy the needed amount of oil from the Persian
Gulf countries who were not averse to selling oil to it to shore up their declining revenue. In fact, the US administration's exaggerated reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was based on a CIA report which claimed that by the year 1985, the Soviet Union would become a net exporter of oil. Statistical information, however, did not substantiate that claim. The report was, therefore, politically motivated.

As regards the Iran-Iraq War, the Soviet Union did not enjoy that much clout with Iran to have intervened in the war on behalf of it. Nor did an Iranian victory look to serve Soviet interests. The USSR could not have liked the defeat of Iraq, the only Soviet ally in the region. The Iranian victory was bound to encourage Islamic resurgence in the Central Asian republics. It would have also emboldened Iran to aid the rebellion in that region.

The US succeeded in not letting the USSR to make inroads in its influence in the region. But, at the same time, in the normalization of relations between Arab monarchies and the USSR, the US lost a source, the Soviet specter, of gaining leverage in the region.

Lastly, one can point out the “mellowing” of Soviet power since mid-1980 as the proof of the US success. But this happened due to the developments whose occurrence was not influenced by the US Persian Gulf policy. The death of three aging/sick Soviet leaders in quick succession, Gorbachev’s accession to the power, who, forced by economic problems, initiated his country’s disengagement from regional conflicts, western policies on Euro-missile deployment, technology trade and Soviet immigration created incentive for significant changes in Moscow’s policy in the Persian Gulf and other parts of the globe.

THE STRATEGY

To meet its objectives at stake in a conflict in the Persian Gulf, the US has adopted different strategies, from non-intervention and covert intervention to direct intervention and maintenance of military presence in and around the region with a view to avoid the intervention as well as to intervene quickly if the need to do so becomes inevitable.

NON-INTERVENTION:

The US responded to the British withdrawal from the region by refraining from taking direct responsibility for the security of the region, let alone assume Britain’s role. Despite the fact the US had already taken the first step towards playing a direct role in the region as early as in the 1940s by establishing close working relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, it did not have a military base in the region to fill the vacuum created by the British withdrawal. American air facilities at Dhahran had been abandoned in the 1960s and only the small MIDEASTFOR remained to represent the American security commitments in the region. Washington’s perception of events and situation in the region were filtered through Iran and Saudi Arabia and the American dilemma in Vietnam tended to discourage direct involvement. The consequence was the “twin pillar” strategy, enunciated in the Nixon doctrine, propounded
in 1969 to minimize the role of the US as the world policeman by delegating the same responsibility to regional powers viz., Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was chosen for this role because of it possessing the world’s largest oil fields and its influence over the smaller states. Iran was perceived by the US as a military partner in this arrangement who would intervene in regional crises destabilising to the US interests in the region. Thus Iran directly intervened in Oman to repulse the Duhfar rebellion. As many as 5,000 Iranian troops were engaged on Duhfari battlefield at any one time in the mid 70s and the US made F-5 Phantoms and destroyers in the Iranian inventory were used to curb the nationalist-turned-Marxist rebellion (36).

Iran’s military build up in the 70s meant the extension of her security perimeter to the approaches of the Persian Gulf. The supply of F-14s with Phonics by the US to Iran missile ware aimed at giving the latter a stand-off capability to engage the enemy outside Iran’s airspace (37). The nature of military cooperation between Iran and the US, the complimentarity of the two countries’ weapon systems, the degree of the US military assistance and the identical policies pursued by the two countries in the region portended that in times of crisis, demanding direct intervention on the part of the US, the Iranian facilities would be available for unrestricted use.

US MILITARY PRESENCE:

After 1979 i.e., after the collapse of one of the pillars—and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, the US did not abandon its non-interventionist approach to regional conflicts. It, instead, adopted the policy of threatening to intervene and building up a capability to intervene in the region at short notice if the situation so demanded (38). This policy was the part of the strategy to deter regional enemy’s design to deny the oil to the US (39) on one hand and to win the confidence of the allies against the regional threat on the other. Of course, the Soviet threat was given precedence to the threat from a regional power. And often US found the suspicion aroused by Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan than the Iran-Iraq war as the basis of the deployment of the RDF and the obtaining of the strategic facilities in the region(40).

The US military presence signaled that its neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war did not stem from an inability to intervene. The US navy was ordered to open to fire at any target whose actions were of threatening nature. The capability to carry out such an aggressive plan against the regional countries kept on being enhanced through out the 80s— from creating the MIDEASTFOR and the RDF to the CENTCOM. The last military command structure encompassed 19 African and Asian countries. Routine military exercises were carried out to practice the seizure and retention of oil bearing areas by landing troops with naval and air support. The American fleet in the Persian Gulf included the Constellation aircraft carrier, several cruisers, destroyers and frigates and the Guadalcanal landing helicopter carrier. The US deployed more than 20 large ships in the area which was the “largest naval group assembled by the USA since the Vietnam War”(41). On the top of all, the Diego Garcia, although 2,200 miles from Harms, was an indispensable naval support base as staging area for P-3 reconnaissance aircraft and alter for B-52 bombers.
The US also won several strategic rights from the friendly governments. These included the stocking of pre-positioned equipment, the building of intelligence facilities, the acquisition of over flight and landing permission and docking rights. Sale of AWACs to Saudi Arabia aimed at entrenching the US in the region as the US administration saw the requirement of a long-term US technical forces support for the AWACs as a means to expand American military presence in Saudi Arabia. The United States liked to possess naval and air bases in the region to deter a regional enemy from creating a situation that could have necessitated direct intervention by it.

However, securing strategic facilities in the region proved hard to come by due to the allies’ reluctance, to an extent of total refusal in the case of some countries mainly Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was emphatically against the presence of US troops on its land. Even it pressurized the smaller states not to accede to the US demand for bases. For example, Sultan Qabus was offered $2.1 billion by Saudi Arabia in exchange for denying basing rights to the RDF. The amount was equal to what the US proposed to give to Oman. Saudi Arabia also prevailed upon Bahrain to restrict US access to its bases (42).

The Persian Gulf states viewed any land basing and substantial presence of the US in the area as a source of instability in the region. Moreover, the “we will seize the oil if we need it” rhetoric of the US made the Persian Gulf allies fear that the US land based presence could one day become a threat to their own security. US Congressional opposition to arms sales to the regional countries had caused a mistrust in the minds of the regional allies about the US sincerity. The mistrust reached new proportions in 1984 when the Democratic party opposed the over-committing of its forces in the Persian Gulf, even in the event of an crisis there, by the US.

The US naval deployment was aimed at meeting the Soviet threat while the regional allies considered the Soviet invasion of the Persian Gulf an unlikely scenario. The regional governments, in fact, opined that the granting permanent strategic facilities to the US by them could indeed make the USSR apprehensive of their moves.

However, these states welcomed the US ‘over-the-horizon’ presence which made a deterring effect on the regional threats. The total absence of the US military presence in and around the region would, the allies viewed, encourage hostile powers to commit aggression, an event these countries wanted to prevent by denying the US direct presence in the region.

The US policy of non-intervention was more strictly followed in tackling Iranian terrorism. The US refrained from using its military might to deal with the hostage crisis. Nor did it threaten Iran of military action on this issue. A covert military operation was unsuccesfully made to rescue the hostages. But the nature of this operation underlined the US policy of not exposing the lives of its nationals in reprimanding an enemy (43).

DIRECT INTERVENTION:
Avoidance not the renunciation of direct intervention has been the US strategy towards the regional conflicts. Direct military intervention has been considered a priority in situations where stakes are high enough to warrant such action. These situations may be the need to achieve narrowly defined objectives that can be accomplished rapidly and decisively with relatively small or large force and to prevent the hostile regional powers from interpreting its policy of non-intervention as incompetence. This is why despite deploying its naval forces, adequate enough to tackle a regional threat, the US brought in ground forces to punish Iraq in the Persian Gulf crisis and deployed land base aircrafts, in form of AWACs, in Saudi Arabia as these actions were the more formidable means to increase operational capabilities than was the deployment of the naval forces.

Thus, when inaction on its part could have lent credence to the allies' doubts about clandestine connection between the US and Iran following the revelation of Iran-Contra arms deal(44), the US decided to escort Kuwaiti tankers. It went on to do so even expecting that its fall-out could be in the form of Iranian attacks on the US ships. Iranian missiles set on fire an American owned tanker the re-flagged tanker anchored in Kuwaiti water on October 15 and 16, respectively. Not only did the US retaliate but it went on broadening the rules of the engagement of its force to permit assistance to all neutral ships.

Similarly, while calling for a diplomatic solution to the crisis started by Iraq by threatening to occupy Kuwait in July 1990, the US also indicated that it would not hesitate to take military action against Iraq if it attacked Kuwait. The US state department noted: “we do not have any defense treaties with Kuwait .... but we also remain committed to supporting the individual and collective self-defense of our friends in Gulf” (45).

Before the Iraqi Invasion, the US deployed a naval task force in the region. Before the Persian Gulf states could decide whether to invite the foreign forces or not, the US, it is reported, had begun exerting pressure on Saudi Arabia to allow its force to land on its territories. A few days after the Iraqi invasion, Bush reiterated his country’s commitment to the security and stability of the Persian Gulf (46). The statement coincided with the arrival of the US troops in the region which showed that the Bush’s statement was not a mere verbal exercise to pressurize Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait but it was a prelude to the despatching of its armed forces. The US forces swell to the strength of 2,000,000 by the end of Oct. 1990, these possessed all the modern and sophisticated weapons. By Oct., the US counted on the possibility of Iraqi withdrawal under international political, diplomatic and economic pressure combined with its coercive diplomacy. In early November, Bush declared that he was increasing the number of American troops in the Persian Gulf by 150,000 and had begun to seek support for a UN Security Council Resolution to permit it to use force against Iraq. It would not be out of place to mention that even Bush did not bother that he had to seek Congressional approval to wage a war. In fact, by continuously sending the country’s armed forces to the Persian Gulf region and sticking to his decision to fight a war, Bush was trying to leave the Congress with no option but to give its assent.

The US approach to the Persian Gulf crisis points to the fact that subjugating a regional threat to its security or that of its allies constituted the basic objective of the US policy and it
did not hesitate to intervene even directly, if only that way this objective could be achieved.

The Iran-Iraq war and the Persian Gulf war examples show that the nature of threat determines the US reaction to a regional conflicts. Iran's attack on neutral ships in 1987 looked to disrupt the supply of oil only, the US, therefore, confined its clashes with the Iran in the Gulf waters. It did not wage a full-fledged war against Iran. As against this, the Iraqi threat was many-dimensional. The US feared that if the iraqi aggression was not repulsed Iraq would establish a permanent control over Kuwait and its oil, become a permanent source of danger to Saudi security and other smaller countries as well, and emerge into a military and political giant in the Persian Gulf region. The US response was also proportionate to the potentiality of the threat. It decided to go whole-hog against Iraq.

However, it is difficult to establish how far has the US policy of direct intervention been effective in relation to the US regional interests. The US ability to deter a regional threat by using force or threatening to use it is captive to the targeted power's response. Two instances can be cited here. The US undertook only a covert operation to free its nationals held as hostages by Iran. The US could have had little difficulty in applying full military power against Iran but, it refrained from doing this because of doubt that the resolute Ayatollah Khomeini would not budge even if Iranian petroleum industry was destroyed, Iranian ports blockaded, Iranian armed forces decimated, Iranian holy places targeted, and if his own life (Imam Khomeini) and the life of thousands of Iranians jeopardized. Similarly, the US-Iraq War in a sense underlined the failure of US coercive diplomacy in kneeling down Saddam. Here one may argue that US attack on Iraq was not the last resort. Rather, it was the choicest option as the US did not want mere Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. True, but did not the presence of one of the world's most-trained armed forces next door that too all set to wage a war fail to compel a Third World power to retreat? Well, Iraq could not avoid the war because of fear of a popular backlash or a military coup, but this drives home a point that Iraq gave the internal threat a precedence over the one from the world's largest military power.

The US limited intervention, such as the one against Iran in 1987, and the full-fledged one, the one against Iraq about three and a quarter years ago, carries some weaknesses. Limited intervention helps achieve short-term objectives only, which may be disproportionate to military and economic cost of the military operation and the international criticism such action invites. A full-fledged intervention pins hope among the allies and the fear among opponents of the repetition of that performance. But in the changing national interests perceptions, the intervention may not remain a ready-made choice to tackle a similar situation later. The inaction in those circumstances would put the erstwhile interventionist power's reputation in great jeopardy among the allies and enemies alike.

**US POLICY OF CRISIS PREVENTION**

The nature of a particular crisis, the implications of its resolution or continuation for the US interests and the US leverage with the parties to dispute determine US policy of crisis prevention in the Persian Gulf.
US did not want the Iran-Iraq war ending with Iranian victory or, for that matter, that of Iraq. It was, therefore, interested in the continuation of the war. Yet, it in order to prevent the Soviet Union from wresting the initiative repeatedly called upon the belligerents to terminate the hostilities. Thus, the main objective of the US crisis prevention during the war was to deny the USSR an opportunity to act as arbiter than to bring about peace (47). The prospect of hijacking of peace initiatives by the Soviet Union in the region was extremely harmful to the US interests as this could have rectified Soviet Union's post-Afghan intervention image in the eyes of the Arab Gulf monarchies.

At the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, the US main aim was to prevent the spreading of the war and the Soviet involvement in it. Lacking total leverage over both the belligerents, who did not even have diplomatic relations with the it, the US was not in position to dictate peace. Thus, owing to its inability to play the role of a peace broker, the US directed its efforts to preventing the escalation of the war.

During intital days of the war, the US was preoccupied with securing the release of its nationals held as hostages by Iran. The war came as an opportunity to criticise Iraq, to win the Iranian goodwill and to get its nationals freed in exchange for weapons and spare parts to Iran.

Even a few years after the outbreak of the war, the US interests in its continuance remained unchanged for a number of reasons. First, since Iran dominated the war, a settlement would have, very likely, been on Iranian terms. Second, the end of the war could have vindicated Iran's position. Third, the oil supplies from the region continued uninterruptedly, not warranting the need of an urgent peace. Fourth, the Iranian threat came in handy to the US to increase its leverage with the Persian Gulf countries. Fifth, the US naval deployment was sufficient to meet any untoward situation, such as the blockade of the the Strait of Hurmuz by Iran. Sixth, any concession to Iran for seeking a peaceful end to the war would have annoyed the Persian Gulf allies.

In the decade preceding the outbreak Iran-Iraq war, the US strategy was to stay away from resolving regional conflicts. The Persian Gulf region was beset with the conflicts which were mainly the territorial disputes in nature. The Carter administration as well as the previous ones found that these did not pose any major threat to the US interests, with Washington believing that the Persian Gulf was an area of economic and commercial activity only. With the Arab-Israeli issue being the matter of primary concern to the the US, it kept itself aloof from next door conflicts (48).

The US crisis prevention lacks objectivity. The UNSCR 598, which was virtually the handiwork of the US, did call on both Iran and Iraq to cease-fire and withdraw their forces to international boundaries. But, since at that time Iran was in control of a vast Iraqi territory, the resolution in effect called for the withdrawal of the Iranian forces.

Coercion was the main instrument of the US crisis prevention in the Persian Gulf crisis. The little time it lost in deploying its forces in Saudi Arabia, the way it activated the UN to pass
resolutions, including the one authorizing it to take military action, and the manner it paid no heed to regional and international efforts for a peaceful end to the crisis indicate that the US was in a hurry to resort to war.

An active policy of crisis resolution or prevention by the US has been beset with certain constraints also. The GCC, for example, has restricted the scope of the US mediation in the crisis erupting among the member-states. The understanding that has evolved among the GCC-states is that they should not refer to their disputes to a third party and take them to international forums, like the UN in whose peace-seeking campaign the US plays the most influential role.

The US diplomacy in the Persian Gulf has suffered from its preoccupation with the Arab-Israeli issue. The US role in ending the Lebanon crisis and the Iran-Iraq war offer a good contrast. In the Iran-Iraq war, the US policy focused on preventing it from spreading. Whereas, in the Lebanon crisis, Reagan administration launched a high-profile diplomatic initiative soon after Syria moved its missile in Lebanon and the Israeli bombing of PLO headquarters in July 1981. It called Philip Habib, distinguished American diplomat of Lebanese-American background, out of retirement. Habib arranged a PLO-Israeli cease-fire along the Lebanese-Israeli border. The US was instrumental in the terminating the hostilities between Israel and the PLO, lifting of the Israeli siege on Beirut, negotiating and arranging the withdrawal of the PLO from Beirut and being the main constituent of the Multinational Force that arrived in Lebanon in August that year to assure the evacuation of the PLO (49).

After the termination of hostilities the US came out with a comprehensive peace plan, known as the Reagan Plan (50). Thus the US obsession continued with Arab-Israeli issue although the Iran-Iraq war at the eve of 1982 posed a more serious threat to the US interests as Iran had begun to dominate the war.

THE FORMER SOVIET UNION AND REGIONAL CONFLICTS

THE POLICY

The USSR's policy towards the Persian Gulf conflicts were guided by two elements viz., ideology and realpolitik, their application being subjected to which of two served the Soviet foreign policy goals most in the given circumstances.

IDEOLOGY

In the 70s, The USSR was placed in a suitable situation to pursue its policy towards the inter-state and intra-state conflicts in the Persian Gulf in keeping with its Leninist-Marxist foreign policy. The US withdrawal from Vietnam, the cleavages in the NATO and its (USSR's) increased conventional and military capabilities led the USSR to proclaim that it would render, when it was necessary, military support to the people subjected to military aggression (51), as illustrated in Breznev's report to the 24th Party Congress in March 1971 (52).

It was reported that the Soviet Union shipped arms, through PDRY, to the Duhefar
resurgents in their war of national liberation against the Sultan of Oman. But, later on, with the waning of the struggle, the Soviet Union became cautious in its commitment to that movement.

Though data are not available to ascertain that whether the Soviet arms supplies to PDRY meant to be passed on to resurgents or not, the USSR did not assist the Duhfars during their suppression by Oman with the help of Iran. Seeing that the liberation movements in the region lacked the needed infrastructure and popular base to bring about radical political changes, the Soviet Union embarked on the second policy option; reconciliation with the non-socialist regimes. This almost abandoned Soviet link with the Marxist movements in the region.

In fact, the Soviet Union made the revolutionary state and not the movement as the main subject of its ideology-bound foreign policy. The PDRY, where a radical movement came to power in November 1967, was then the automatic choice. Strategically, South Yemen's offer of extending USSR anchorage off the Island of Socotra and access to the port and airport at the Aden was considered vital by the Soviet Union for gaining a foothold in the Indian Ocean. South Yemen was an entry point to the Arabian peninsula for the Soviet forces landing from the east. The USSR also hoped that PDRY would be also be helpful in spreading Marxist revolution in the heart of the peninsula and the Persian Gulf. In addition, PDRY was useful as a surrogate state particularly in the situation where the USSR wanted to shroud its involvement.

The other regional state which was extended support by the USSR in its struggle with the pro-US states was Iraq. However, the Soviet support to Iraq was not always unqualified and unwavering. Since Iran was a greater strategic prize, the USSR’s did not want to ruin its ties with it inspite of whatever little influence it had had on the Shah and later on the Khomeini regime. During the time of the Shah, the Soviet Union did not hold a pro-Iraqi view on the question of Baghdad's border dispute with Iraq. When the Iran-Iraq war began, the USSR adopted a volte face, an approach very unlikely of a superpower towards its ally. It publicly opposed Iraq. It assured Iran that it had no intention to disfavor it for Iraq. It went on imposing arms embargo on Iraq. Beside, the deterioration in Soviet-Iraq relations, the main reason behind the Soviet Union pursuing this course at the beginning of the war till the next two years was the fear that an outright defeat of Iran would lead to the collapsing of the Khomeini regime and its replacement by a pro-Western government.

It was only when Iran refused to join the Soviet bloc and the possibility of a not-too-friendly Iran defeating its only ally in the region arose did the USSR tilt back to Iraq, most notably by resuming arms supply to it. In later years, the Soviet Union supplied to Iraq weapons like Scud missiles which were instrumental in turning the tide of war in favor of Iraq after a gap of about five years.

When the Persian Gulf crisis started, the Soviet Union had already abandoned the ideological foundation of its foreign policy. Though the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Iraq was very much in vogue, the Soviet Union's commitments to it or any other ally for that matter had turned moribund after the end of the Cold War. Only a few glimpses of the USSR's cold war foreign policy were seen, such as its decision not to participate under the US banner in a war against its ally and its refusal to call back its military advisors from Iraq.
The Soviet realpolitik in the regional conflicts was based on the objective of repairing its relations with the side opponent to its ally in a conflict, even if it amounted to a deviation from the Leninist-Marxist foreign policy principles. Thus, despite helping South Yemen indirectly in its 1979 war against YAR, the USSR also embarked on a policy of rapprochement with the Sana to take the advantage of the Yemenis' unhappiness over Saudi domination of them and over the US policy of not directly supplying them arms.

The USSR signed a major arms deal with YAR (56). It rescheduled and partly wrote off YAR's debts and tried to wean the latter away from Saudi Arabia and the US.

The Soviet Support to the national liberation movements in the Persian Gulf region waned gradually. The most notable example of this was Soviet indecision to help the Duhfaris out when they were being suppressed at the hands of the Iranian forces and the British advisers in the mid-70s. Since the USSR's assistance to the Duhfaris was channeled through the PDRY, the Soviet role in sustaining the movement got contained when the PDRY accepted, in March 1976, Saudi financial assistance in return for normalization of relations with Oman (57). In the 80s, a major shift in the Soviet policy appeared with the Soviet Union preferring state-to-state relations with all of the non-Marxist countries with an aim to limit the US role in these countries (58).

As regards the Iran-Iraq War, the realization that it was neither the result of imperialist designs in the region (59) nor did the class struggle play any role in the origin and conduct of the war, rather nationalism, traditions and religion determined the course of events, made the Soviet Union not to define its role in the war on the basis of its old policy formulations vis-a-vis the Third World conflicts (60). The Soviet policy towards the war was dictated by the vicissitudes of its relations with the US only. It, therefore, at the outbreak of the war clarified that it would not brook an Iranian defeat even at the hands of its own ally—Iraq. This position was altered in favor of Iraq later to cash in on the re-integration of Iraq to the Persian Gulf politics. Support to Iraq increased the possibility of expanding its influence in the region (61).

In fact, marginalisation of American influence was the main goal of Soviet involvement in regional conflicts. In order to achieve this, the USSR did not hesitate in deviating from its commitment to its ally. For instance, when Iraq seized a narrow strip of Kuwaiti territory in March 1973, Moscow asked it in clear terms to retreat (62).

Contrary to the claims of Hawks in the US, the oil did not constitute a central element in the Soviet Policy towards Persian Gulf conflicts. The Soviet tilt in favor of Iran in 1980-82 was seen as a Soviet design to intervene in the war and subsequently seize the oil fields in the region. In fact, most of such apprehensions were made on the assumption that the Soviet Union would soon become dependent on the Persian Gulf oil (63).

These assumptions were embarrassingly inaccurate. The Soviet Union was averse to resort to this option. It had calculated that aggression in the Persian Gulf would lead to the superpower confrontation. The Soviet Union had, as early as 1980, tried to remove such doubts
by proposing in December that year a five-point formula to establish peace in the Persian Gulf region (64).

It is true that from the early 1980s the USSR launched a drive to conserve energy and told its East European allies that it could not increase its oil exports to them above the 1980 level, but to interpret this as an oil crisis in the USSR of such magnitude that the seizure of oil resources in the Persian Gulf had become imminent is a pure fantasy. Nor is it any less illogical to think that the USSR, who had told its allies to go elsewhere for oil, would suddenly for their sake invade the Oil-rich countries of the Persian Gulf and risk a world war. Even the possibility of an alliance between the USSR and the oil-rich countries to deny the oil to the West, as feared the policy makers in the US, did not exist. The Arabs saw the USSR as a competitor in the world oil market, often working at cross purposes as demonstrated by the Soviet Union when it assured, during the 1973 embargo, the US and Europe to supply them the oil and in 1982 when it played a major role in bringing down the oil prices.

THE US FACTOR

The Soviet Union saw most of the conflicts in the Persian Gulf as either instigated by the US or used by the latter as a pretext to encircle it and eliminate its influence in an area of enormous strategic importance to it (65).

The Soviet Union was more apprehensive on this count in the case of the Iran-Iraq War as it heralded the era of massive US naval deployment in the region and coincided with the ensuing of the Second Cold war. The Soviet leaders repeatedly described this war as senseless and fratricidal for having served the interests of the US provided it a pretext to consolidate its military presence in the region (66).

The Soviet reactions to the Persian Gulf conflicts, in the context of its relations with the US, were, therefore, to resist the US on one hand and cut into the US influence on the other. This strategy culminated into a policy of competition with the US without escalating it to the point of a direct confrontation. Thus in the Iran-Iraq War, the USSR's official stand was the 'neutrality' so as not to allow the US a chance to directly intervene in the war. The USSR also readily agreed to the US proposal for mutual non-involvement in the war. The USSR, in addition, was for a joint effort by them to resolve the crisis (67).

Thus the USSR preferred moderate means and moderate targets to serve its interests in the region, influencing the course of the war in such a way that the US was denied of establishing a foothold in Iran, a strategic prize for the USSR after the Shah's ouster. Beside this, other Soviet objectives were preventing Iraq from joining the US bloc and using Iraq as an instrument to improve relations with the Arab Gulf countries to reduce US leverages with them.

The US factor determined the Soviet shifts in the Iran-Iraq war. It decided to side with Iran in the early stages of the war in order to prevent the US from seizing the same opportunity by supplying arms and ammunition to Iran. USSR's tilt towards Iraq later was aimed at stemming the growing US and the Western influence in that country. It resumed its arms supplies to Iraq to lessen Iraqi dependence on the Western arms. The Soviet move also stemmed
from its perception of US limitations in the region. The Soviet Union knew that its support to Iraq could not be countered by the US by changing sides. Nor was there even a remote possibility of Iran joining the US to counter balance the Soviet support to Iraq.

**THE STRATEGY : FROM NON-INTERVENTION TO DISENGAGEMENT**

The USSR's role in the Persian Gulf conflicts was non-interventionist. During the Yemen war, during PDNY-Oman crisis and in respect of national liberation movements, the USSR resigned itself to merely providing military wherewithal to the party it supported. Even the nature of Soviet support to national liberation movements was quite low profile. It supported these movements from behind; through the surrogate states.

The risk of military collision with the United States was the single most persuasive factor determining Soviet Union's this particular attitude. In most of the regional conflicts either both of the superpowers were on the opposite side of the spectrum (PDNY-YAR wars and PDNY-Oman conflict) with, moreover, Washington showing a high level of interests. This reminded the USSR of the risk of a conflict if it intervened militarily to help out the party it was supporting (68). The fading away of the 'detente' and the arrival of Reagan increased the the danger of superpowers confrontation, forcing the Soviet leadership to reassess the wisdom of taking an expansionist course. By that time, the dangers of Intervention had outmatched the benefits of the expansion of its Third World empire.

The decision not to intervene on behalf of the Socialist regimes and allies was also caused by a shift in the USSR policy i.e. cultivating oil rich capitalist-oriented states in place of weak Marxist-Leninist regimes (69). Then, of course, there were conflicts in the region, such as the Iran-Iraq war, which did not fit in the class war model, a pretext used by the USSR to intervene in Afghanistan, that would have necessitated Soviet intervention.

To see that its retreat did not signal to the US its weakness, the USSR opted for maintaining an ability to intervene if the need arose. Thus it deployed a strong fleet in the Indian Ocean, troops and planes in Afghanistan and established strategic and political footholds in South Yemen and Ethiopia. While, at a same time, the USSR also saw to it that its unwillingness to intervene from allies' side did not cause an erosion in its political influence in the region. It continued to supply arms and send military advisors, both technical and combat personnel, to the friendly countries in the conflict zone (70).

Faced with severe economic constraints, the USSR began from the mid-80s a dramatic retreat from the Third World conflicts, reflected in its total disengagement from the revolutionary processes in the Third World (71) to greater emphasis on the state-to-state relations with the non-socialist states, and cooperation with the US on the Third World conflicts.

The Soviet Union could hardly sustain its activism, particularly in the spheres of arming its allies and matching the US military deployment (72). In 1989, i.e., on the eve of Malta Summit, Gorbachev slashed naval deployment in the Mediterranean by more than half which left...
Moscow with a handful of warships, one or two submarines and a few auxiliaries. Gorbachev did not try to improve poor facilities in South Yemen and Syria. The USSR also offered the US to negotiate on naval confidence-building measures and proposed strategic and conventional arms control.

The deteriorating economy also diverted the attention of policy makers in the USSR to internal issues and formulation of a foreign policy which would permit their government to address their domestic woes more effectively. Economic restructuring enhanced the need of access to the western technologies and expertise. This, in the first place, demanded reduction of tension with the US by abandoning all sorts of military and political competition with it.

The mess in Afghanistan brought home the point that military activism was politically erronous and economically costly to have compliant governments. Enhancement of good neighborly relations with the bordering states like Iran and close ties with non-socialist and the pro-US states in the Arabian peninsula was regarded as equally effective in strategy achieving this objective.

Growing unrest in the Central Asian republics also explains Moscow’s policy to shun confrontationist attitude towards the Arab governments and Iran. Being the Muslim states these countries could in retaliation exploit the potential for instability and separatism in the Central Asian region (73).

Throughout the Iran-Iraq War, the USSR tried to disengage itself from it by maintaining a sort of neutrality. At the beginning of the war, it imposed arms embargo against Iraq with which it was tied up in the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. After the mid 80s, the Soviet Union’s neutrality turned pro-Iraq as it emerged Iraq’s main supplier of arms (74). However, alongside arming Iraq the USSR tried to rebuild its relations with Iran. This process included a visit by the then foreign minister, Eduard Sheverdandze, to that country. Sheverdandze was the only dignitary from the Superpower countries who was granted a meeting with the Iranian spiritual leader, Ayotallah Khomeini.

The Soviet Union’s involvement in the escorting of the Kuwaiti tankers in 1987 marked a little aberration in its policy of disengagement. But the Soviet involvement in the escort operation does not qualify to be an act of military activism compared to the nature and objectives of its previous engagements in and outside the region. It was a low-profile engagement. The Soviet Union deployed only small frigates, lightly armed minesweepers, and supply ships in the operation. The USSR’s involvement remained a non-violent activity although its own ships in the Persian Gulf waters came to be attacked by Iran. On May 6, 1987, Iranian gunboats damaged a Soviet Fighter en-route to Saudi Arabia. On May 17, one of the tankers of the USSR had leased to Kuwait hit a mine. But on both the occasions the Soviet Union did not retaliate, even it did not increase the level of its force in the Persian Gulf.

The Soviet Union gave the crisis prevention central emphasis in its foreign policy agenda for the Persian Gulf region, provided it served it in competing with the US for influence. The
crisis-prevention became an effective means in the region for the USSR to allay the fears of "Soviet threat" among the Arab peninsular countries. It also helped the Soviet Union create the image of a genuine peace broker in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The centrality of crisis prevention in the Soviet policy became visible in the 1980s. However, if in the first half of this decade the Soviet policy of crisis prevention aimed at competing with the US in the second half of that decade it was an outcome of its retreat from the competition. In other words, form the part and parcel of its activism in the Persian Gulf in the early 80s, the crisis prevention policy in later 80s turned into a reflection of Gorbachev's disillusionment with the Soviet globalism(75).

Particularly, Gorbachev maintained that the policy of crisis escalation through military expansionism and political activism in the crises-prone pockets in the region threatened to boomerang. For, the resultant competition with the US was a bigger threat to the Soviet security and interests. This hypothesis directed Gorbachev's focus on de-stabilizing the potential of Third World conflicts(76).

The main thrust of the Soviet crisis-prevention was the creation of a peace and stability in the region leading to the withdrawal of the US naval deployment from the region. This aim was central to all of the Soviet peace proposals: from the one by Breznev at the Indian parliament in 1980, which called for undertaking by the superpowers not to intervene in Persian Gulf conflicts, to the one by Gorbachev for the creation of nuclear free zone in the region and the gradual withdrawal of foreign bases and fleet.

The Soviet Union either tried carved out for itself the role of an equal partner in a multilateral solution to a crisis or it advocated a bilateral solution to a conflict with both the superpowers abstaining from playing a direct role in the peace processes.

Right from the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq hostilities, the Soviet Union's position was that the war was harmful to the interests of both sides. It was interested in an early end of the war because it feared that the weakening and the toppling of the Khomeini regime would result into the re-establishment of American military presence in Iran. Later, when Iran persisted with prosecuting the war, the Soviet Union opposed it because the Iranian threat had caused the Persian Gulf states to seek closer military ties with the United states.

Although an end of the war implied that both the countries would flood the market with oil, causing downward pressure on the oil prices (77), but the link between continued fighting and the growing US political and military domination of the region was more harmful to the Soviet interests than the perceived threat of the loss of Soviet oil revenues.

USSR ensured the adopting of the UN resolution 598 of 1987, which called for the end of hostilities, even though it opposed imposing the sanctions on Iran so as not to antagonize Iran. The Soviet Union also helped in resolving the post-war differences between Iran and Iraq. In 1990, it proposed a meeting of the Soviet, Iranian and Iraqi foreign ministers in the USSR for this purpose(78).

Barring those US sponsored peace efforts in which the USSR played the second fiddle, the Soviet crisis prevention diplomacy failed. For, its peace proposals were more often than not directed against the US and, therefore, were rejected by the latter. Breznev's peace plan
bypassed Afghanistan entirely while calling for the removal of foreign military bases from the Persian Gulf region and "Adjacent islands". Breznev plan in essence indicated that the Soviet Union would remain in Afghanistan, but the US should get out of the Persian Gulf and Diego Garcia (79). Then, with the Cold War at its peak, it was doubtful that even Soviet proposal to negotiate with the US on Afghanistan issue would have been successful. The US would have not agreed to link Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan to reduction of its naval forces in the Indian Ocean and the Soviet Union could not be expected of offering anything more generous than this.

Beside this, the Soviet Union came out with only a few peace proposals during the Iran-Iraq War and talked more about peace in policy statements etc. which were more an ‘image building’ exercises than a serious effort towards the settlements of regional disputes.

US-SOViet RELATIONS AND PERSIAN GULF CONFLICTS
Mutual relationship was the major determinant in the superpowers involvement in the Persian Gulf conflicts. Thus, following were the aims and objectives of their policies towards each other vis-a-vis regional conflict. --avoiding the development of situations in which the risk of direct confrontation might have become significant.--avoidance of appearing defeated by the actions of rival and --appearing successful in the defense of clients.

COMPETITION
Outdoing each other was the main thrust of their actions and interactions in the regional conflicts. But, it was in all respects a peaceful competition with one superpower altering its position if it looked to prove dangerous enough to provoke the other one. Thus in other words competition without confrontation was the end of their policies. To quote Janice Grosstein "Both are struggling to avoid direct confrontation which might grow out of the escalation of the regional war... and in their struggle they are partners as well as adversaries" (80).

The competition was directed not to concede anything to the adversary in one’s own sphere of action(81). Hence, this urge resulted into a mutual misperception of each other’s moves despite an understanding to avoid direct confrontation. When the Iran-Iran War broke out, the US feared that the Soviet Union had the capability to intervene militarily on behalf of Iran to influence the outcome of the fighting against it (US). It, therefore, reminded the USSR that the Carter Doctrine would apply to a Soviet intervention in Iran too. Whereas, the Soviet Union cast doubts on the US neutrality in the war, fearing that in order to get American hostages released, Washington might switch from neutrality to an open support to Iran.

This shows that despite the fact that both of the superpowers had declared neutrality in the war and were concerned with the security of Iran in the early phase of the war, they because of their prejudicial interpretation of each other’s motives confronted than cooperated.

COOPERATION
In some respects the interests of the superpowers in the case of conflicts in the Persian Gulf were common. For example, both of them wanted that the border disputes in the region did not flare up. Or both of them wanted that the Iran-Iraq War did not spread to the Arab Gulf countries. In that war both agreed to maintain a neutral stand. Then, they, since 1982-83, began backing Iraq and helped its defense build-up (82). In the wake of repeated Iranian attacks on Kuwaiti tankers both the superpowers provided Kuwait naval escort and they finally cooperated with each other in the United Nations to pass the Security Council Resolution 598 which called for the end of the war.
In the Iran-Iraq War, the superpowers cooperation in part emanated from the fact that one of the combatants, Iran, was not associated with either of the two power blocs. As a result, the superpowers ended up supporting the same side as they did while criticizing Iraq for starting the war in the early stages of the war and thereafter backing it against Iran.

But more than that, their cooperation was caused by Iran's hostile attitude towards both the superpowers. The Iranian victory against a Soviet ally could not be an automatic gain for the US. Nor would have this been so for the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the prospects of Iranian victory threatened to be the mutual loss. For the US, it was bound to lead to the emergence of a regional power and the rise of Islamic as well as She'i fundamentalism. For the USSR, the Iranian victory could have been the source of encouragement to the rising Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asian republics and a moral victory for the rebel Mujahideens in Afghanistan. To quote Kaw Marita's words:

“For such conflicts they may be said to stand on the same side of the mirror. In sum, bipolar rivalry had not necessarily locked the United States and the Soviet Union in a tit-for-tat action-reaction cycle”.

**SUPERPOWERS' CONFLICT RESOLUTION POLICY**

Superpowers' role in resolution of conflicts in the Persian was limited. For instance, in the Iran-Iraq War, the OIC, the Arab League, Algeria and to some an extent the UN and the NAM figured as major actors involved in seeking an end to the war than the US or the USSR. They (the superpowers) at best tried to manage instead of preventing the regional conflicts. Of larger interest to them was that a particular conflict did not escalate to a point that a nuclear war between themselves could have become inevitable.

The end of the Iran-Iraq war is said to be a consequence of the de-escalation of superpowers' rivalry. It holds true so far as the reduction of the tension between the two superpowers saved the UNSCR resolution 598, which turned out to be the basis of the end of the war, from being vetoed. But the question arises did the resolution play any role in ending the war? As soon as the resolution was passed, Iran categorically rejected it. Iran accepted it as a face-saving when in the wake of Iraqi victories and its war-weariness the specter of defeat had begun haunting it. So the end of the war was not due to fact that the superpowers had come out with a proposal acceptable to both the belligerents.

Even the 'new detente' and the end of the Iran-Iraq war can not be interlinked as the latter was not a proxy war. In this war each belligerent was independent of superpowers' influence in taking crucial decisions including the one to terminate the hostilities.

The superpowers peace proposals, mooted separately, by and large failed. These were designed to secure ally's interests and, as a result, faced rejection by the other party to the
dispute. Whereas, the objective of securing a peace-arrangement between the disputants sides by a superpower which did not serve the interests of the adversary diminished the chances of joint effort.

**LIMITED ROLE**

In fact, the Persian Gulf conflicts were unique in the sense that they were not pegged to the superpowers confrontation(88). As a logical consequence to this, the superpowers' role in these was limited. The wars and conflicts erupted without being instigated by the superpowers. The regional actors were at best influenced not directed by the superpowers in managing their conflicts. The conflicts in the region usually erupted for the reasons which bore little significance to superpowers confrontation. Very often the parties to conflict themselves tried to keep a distance from the superpowers as their collusion with the latter was used to be domestically unwelcome (89). This ingratitude on the part of the clients coupled with the rise of regional powers, suspicious and restful of extra-regional penetration, further marginalised the superpowers' involvement in the conflicts in the region.

**THE SUPERPOWERS AND THE BORDER DISPUTES**

In dealing with regional conflicts, the preceding discussion covers only those that have turned into full-fledged wars. The low-profile border disputes have automatically gone un-mentioned. The reason for this is that the superpowers approach to them was not similar to their approach towards those of the first category of conflicts.

**UNITED STATES APPROACH**

As for the US is concerned, its policy has been to see that the border disputes, most of which are among the GCC member countries, do not flare up. Since, all the GCC-member states together make the major trading partner and strategic and political ally of the US, the latter does not want instability, arising out of territorial disputes, in the region which might force it to side with one of the party to the dispute and hence worsen its political and trade ties with the country it sides against. Successive US administrations feared that the USSR, which enjoyed diplomatic relations with at least three of the eight states of the Arab peninsula, would make most out of such situation.

**THE USSR's APPROACH**

The Soviet Union's approach differed from one conflict to another. In the Arab peninsular region, it liked the surfacing of border disputes among the US allies forcing the US to take side and, in turn, giving it a chance to throw its support to the other party. But, since such an opportunity did not arise, the Soviet Union pursued an altogether different policy. It devised the Asian Formula in the 70s which aimed at the substitution of the existing military political groupings with a regional one excluding the outside powers. The Asian formula stipulated cooperation among the regional states revolving around the renunciation of force, respect for sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs and the development of intra-
regional economic ties.

As regards the Iran-Iraq border disputes, the USSR almost skipped over this issue in its relations with both of the disputants. Careful to nurture close ties with both Iran and Iraq these countries, it decided not to support either of them on border question.

The soviet Union did not alter its policy when the Shah’s military build up and his intransigence against Iraq on the question of border dispute increased. Rather than taking sides the USSR counseled restraints and called for a negotiated settlement. Cautian characterized USSR’s policy of arms transfer to Iraq during those days, lest it led to the outbreak of a war. It maintained that its arms sales to Iraq were linked to that country’s internal security problems.

More or less same was the USSR’s approach to Iran’s dispute with the UAE over three islands. On this question, the USSR did not adopt an official position although its allies Libya and Iraq condemned the Iranian action as an invasion of the Arab land. As a matter of fact, the Soviet encyclopedia identified the disputed islands as Iranian. The USSR at that time had attached considerable importance to maintain friendly ties with Iran after the Shah’s assurance that it would not let Iran to become a military base against the USSR(90).

In the case of boundary dispute between Iraq and Kuwait, the USSR adopted an impartial stance. It again refrained from supporting its ally in this dispute in exchange for the establishment of diplomatic relations with Kuwait(91).

Thus it can be said that although one of the parties to many a dispute in the region were the camp follower of the USSR, the latter did not come forward to support them in their conflicts with the pro-US states. Instead, the USSR tired to win the goodwill of both the parties.

To sum up, the superpowers had a little role to play in border disputes. These disputes never reached an alarming proportions also to have invited superpowers’ involvement. Some of the disputes were settled through regional mechanism—the GCC—. There existed an understanding of sort among the regional countries to avoid to seek superpowers help in settling their disputes. Some of the states settled their territorial disputes in their own favor by using their superior power, while the weaker powers reconciled with it, instead of approaching to the superpowers for redressal. In the 1960s and the 1970s, Saudi Arabia secured territorial concessions from Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Oman. In 1971 the Shah of Iran seized greater and lesser Tunbs and forced the ruler of the Shahrjah to acquiesce in to the Iranian occupation of the Island of Abu Musa in return for a financial settlement. But, in none of these cases the countries at the receiving tried to involve either of the superpowers for restoring the status quo.
REFERENCES & FOOTNOTES


3. Talks about US-Persian Gulf security cooperation is little heard now than during and a few months after the Persian Gulf crisis.


7. As told by the then US Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the Strategic Consensus was to "establish a consensus in the strategic-regional sense among the states of the area, stretching from Pakistan in the east to Egypt west, including Turkey, Israel and other threatened states", cited in Reich, Bernard, "United States Middle East Policy in the Carter and Reagan Administrations", The Middle East Journal, Winter 1984-85, Pp. 15,16.


14. In the United States the Jewish lobby and Israel’s supporters campaigned for a war to dismantle Iraq’s military capability. They held that Israel was no less endangered by Iraq


16. The combined total of the US, West Europe and Japan’s oil imports cost $275 b in 1980 from $145 b in 1978.


20. Hollen, Christopher Von, N. 1, P. 1068.


22. However, the Iraqi air force lacked sufficient strength and the Iraqi missiles lacked sufficient precision. The oil facilities in Saudi Arabia were, therefore, least vulnerable to sabotage during the war.

23. This was because the overthrow of the Shah and US-Iran crisis, that resulted from it, barred the United States from using Iran as a base against the Soviet Union. See Kazemzadeh Firuz, “Hints of the Future Hidden in the Past”, Far Eastern Economic Review, September 5, 1980, P. 26.


27. However, critics to the “Strategic Consensus” idea argue, and reasonably so, that it was oblivious to the reality of local conflicts in the area. In the case of Iran-Iraq War, the US
allies could not agree to cooperate with Israel to coerce Iran. Such a tie-up would have sharpened the local people’s resentment against the monarchical governments which, in turn, could have been capitalized by Iran to foment internal disturbances there. Moreover, this was bound to strain the relations between Iraq and other Arab Gulf states as Iraq was avowedly anti-Israel and was smarting from the Israeli attack on its nuclear reactor, Osirak, in 1982. This situation would have not served Iraq’s purpose too, as it would have caused the termination of financial and logistic support of the Arab Gulf countries to Iraq and the latter abandoning of its role to defend the Arab Gulf states against Iran. In consequence, Iran would have been emboldened to take on the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.


32. About a couple of months before Kuwait sought protection of its ships, Iran had test-fired Silkworm Surface-to-Surface missile, purchased from China, in the Qeshem Island in the Strait of Hurmuz. The Iranians had also test-fired two such missiles from the Faw peninsula at the head of the Persian Gulf. These missiles were capable of hitting the Kuwaiti capital and most of that country’s oil installations.


38. This policy was for the first time outlined in 1976 by the then US Secretary of Defence, Harold Brown, who stated that the US “should be ready to fight simultaneously one and a half wars, one large scale war, most likely in the NATO responsibility zone and a limited

39. Washington also resorted to the diversification and substitution of energy resources and other contingent arrangements as an intensive to hedge against such denial. See also Ravenal, Earl C., “The Case for Adjustment” Foreign Policy, No. 81, Winter 1990-91, P. 9.


43. Even the enemy states took full advantage of the US preferring to protect the lives of its nationals held as hostages by the enemy country than taking military action against the erring power. When Iran-backed Lebanese Hezbollah hijacked TWA flight 847 in April 1986 and made five American nationals hostages for securing the release of the prisoners, held by Israel, the US Secretary of State, George Shultz, issued a warning to Iran that if any harm was done to five American hostages, the US would retaliate against Iran. Tehran responded immediately not by denying its connection with the terrorists but threatening a larger hostage seizure. See for detail, Bernstein, Alvin H., “Iran’s Low Intensity War against the United States”, Orbis Vol. 30, No. 1, Spring 1986, Pp. 19-67.


45. Reich Bernard, N. 7., P. 42.


50. The Reagan plan envisaged a self-governing West Bank associated with Jordan under Palestinian control, status of Jerusalem as a united city but subject to future negotiation between the parties to the dispute. The Plan was rejected by Israel, PLO, Jordan and the Arab countries.


59. The Soviet writings pointed out that since the roots of the war were inherent in the territorial disputes that pre-dated the imperialism, the outbreak of the war was not a handiwork of the US or the Western countries.


61. Despite abrupt reversals in the Iran-USSR relations, Iran was considered by the Soviet Union as one if its main supporters in the region and a geographical base for establishing a wider presence in the region. See Chubin, Shahram, N. 32, P. 27.


63. Doubts on this issue were raised by the CIA in its highly publicized study in April 1977 which stated that the Soviet oil production would reach its highest level in the early 1980s. In the mid-1908s, the USSR would be forced to import more than 23.5 million barrels oil per day.

64. The proposal, which was presented by Breznev before Indian parliament, included mutual commitment not to establish military bases in the area, not to use and threaten the use of force against the countries of Persian Gulf, to respect the non-aligned status chosen by the Persian Gulf states, to respect the sovereign rights of states of the states to their natural resources, not to raise any obstacle or threat to normal trade
exchange and the use of sea lanes linking the states of the region with other countries of the world.


71. This distinct change was expressed in documents of the New Party Program published in October 1985, and the report of the General Secretary, Micheal Gorbachev, to the 27th Party Congress. The program referred to that the “USSR had profound sympathy for the aspirations of the peoples who experienced the heavy and demeaning yoke of colonial servitude”—“a tepid phrase”, says Fukuyama Francis, “used repeatedly by both Gorbachev and his predecessor, Yuri Andropove to signal the limit of Soviet support for the Third World clients”. Gorbachev’s speech omitted a separate discussion on the Third World altogether, did not mention a single Soviet client by name and accorded no special status to the “socialist oriented countries”. This, it may be said, was the total rejection of Breznev’s legacy that began with the joint Soviet-Cuban intervention in Angola in 1975, continued through the Joint Soviet-Cuban involvement on behalf of Ethiopia in 1977-78 and culminated in the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. See Fukoyama Francis, N. 59. P. 715.


74. Nearly one-third of the arms delivered to the principals in the Iran-Iraq war, since fighting began in 1980, came from the Soviet Union. West European share in the combatants’ arms acquisitions was about 25 percent and that of China 15 percent.


78. Iran and Iraq welcomed the initiative but did make any attempt to hold such a meeting.

79. However, at the 26th Soviet Communist Party Congress in February, he acknowledged that Afghanistan's international aspects might be discussed in connection with Persian Gulf Security, however, rejecting any considerations of internal Afghan affairs.


81. Details pertaining to this are elaborated elsewhere in this chapter. See also, Luard Evan, "Superpowers and Regional Conflicts", Foreign Affairs, Vol. 64, No. 5, Summer 1986, Pp. 1007-25.

82. Bakhash, Shaul, N. 19, P. 608-610.

84. The Fundamentalist threat was more ominous as it had a sociological dimension also. It had become a class phenomenon as a 'movement of the oppressed' as Imam Khomeini coined it.


88. Some analysts have, however, argued that there existed a close connection between regional conflicts and global competition. See Chubin, Shahram, Security in the Persian Gulf: The Role of Outside Powers, Totowa, NJ Allenheld, Osmun for the IISS, 1981. However, this hypothesis has been influenced by the trend to look at the regional conflicts from the cold war angle.

90. Chubin, Shahr- n, N. 37, Pp. 18-22.
91. Rubinstien, Alvin Z., N. 57, P. 447.