The supremacy exercised by England over the Persian Gulf constitutes a classic illustration of what Mahan termed the 'influence of sea-power upon history'. As Albuquerque realised while laying the foundations of Portuguese domination over western India, hegemony over the Gulf was imperative for any maritime power seeking to establish an empire in the sub-continent. The tenacity with which the British out-maneuvered their European rivals in Persian waters during the seventeenth century indicates that they were aware of the strategic potentialities of the region. However, till the close of the eighteenth century England's attention was directed primarily towards the tasks of territorial acquisition and political consolidation in India. It required the French threat, and the ambitious statesmanship of Wellesley, to give a tangible basis to British predominance over the Gulf — a predominance which found its expression in the engagements contracted with the states of Oman.

The maintenance of the integrity of Masqat was an essential feature of British policy and determined the attitude adopted by the Government of India towards the problems it successively confronted there. The Canning Award, for instance, which confirmed the
secession of Zanzibar, was formulated with the idea of creating two viable states in the place of a loosely co-ordinated empire embracing two continents. Yet Canning’s decision was hardly a brilliant stroke of policy. It struck a fatal blow at the economic viability of Oman, and reduced the state to a condition where it was dependent upon financial assistance from India for its existence.

In spite of the impression a superficial survey might impart, the conflict between Lawrence and the forward policy school in 1866 did not involve any departure on the Viceroy’s part from the cardinal axiom of British policy. For all his circumspection, Lawrence was not prepared to view with indifference the absorption of the Imamate by Riyadh. He only differed from Frere on the attitude to be assumed towards the Wahhabis after Imam Faisal had made it clear that he sought no quarrel with the British Government. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that in Oman the advocates of a forward policy adopted too provocative a posture, and it was the Viceroy’s stand which subsequent events vindicated.

The consequences arising of a policy of involvement pursued after Thawaini’s assassination bear eloquent witness to the validity of Lawrence’s approach. The support given to Salim bin Thawaini in 1868 was un-judicious and resulted in imposing political
instability on the country for a number of years. However, to an extent the maintenance of British influence over the state *ipso facto* involved a departure from non-involvement. To substantiate this assertion we turn to an analysis of British policy towards the conservative movement in Oman. It is clear that the conservative leadership commanded wide support among the tribes of the interior; and the Sayyids, whose rule was identified with the commercial classes, could never hope to stabilise their position. However, swayed by commercial interests, the British Government propped up the 'liberal' forces through measures which violated the principles of non-interference which supposedly guided it.

The last decade of the nineteenth century witnessed a sudden change in the political situation in Oman as a consequence of the intensification of colonial antagonisms between the nations of Europe. With her position in the continent secured through an alliance with Russia, France became active once again in Gulf politics as a rival of England. The intrigues she instigated in Oman through the agency of an astute representative attained their climax in the Jissah lease. However, French activity in the Imamate never posed a serious challenge to British hegemony, because it was in the nature of a diversionary tactic, executed in order to wring concessions from England in North Africa.
Proceeding to the more extended horizon of the Trucial States, we observe that both Persia and Turkey viewed with uneasiness the influence which the British Government had come to acquire over the maritime Arab chiefs. Of the two countries it was in Persia that sentiment over the Gulf was particularly strong. So far as Turkey was concerned the question was one of marginal importance, and served more as a medium for expressing hostility towards England than anything else.

The fact that Persia was not a free agent after Turkmanchay introduced a further element of complication in the Gulf question. To deal with Teheran as an independent political entity presented no problem to the greatest sea-power of the age. But England had always to bear in mind the fact that any ostentatious application of pressure on Persia would drive her into the arms of Russia. Persian statesmen were aware of the advantages of their position, and in one instance they were able to extract concessions from the Foreign Office through raising the bogey of collaboration with St. Petersburg. Not surprisingly, the Indian authorities viewed the Imperial Government's pusillanimity with feelings of dismay, and protested against what appeared to them a policy of appeasement.
Gulf polities after 1870, Turkish ambitions in the region were a source of concern to British statesmen throughout the period under review. From the vantage-point Midhat Pasha won for his country in 1871, the porte could with the greatest of ease embark upon a policy of subversion in respect of the maritime states under British protection. It was to eliminate this danger that the Lytton Government advanced a proposal for the division of Arabia-on-the-Gulf into English and Turkish spheres of control. However, Salisbury was sceptical of Turkey acquiescing in the proposal, since it did not incorporate any concessions to her on a _quid pro quo_ basis. Subsequent events justified the Foreign Minister's scepticism. For in 1880 the Porte turned down an offer formulated substantially along the lines suggested by the Government of India. Thereafter, increasing antagonism between England and Turkey over questions like Egypt made any understanding between the two powers over the Gulf impossible.

II

Notwithstanding the earnestness with which England contested control over the Gulf with Persia and Turkey, there was a touch of mock-seriousness
about the duels she fought with the aforementioned powers. The real challenge to British hegemony came after the 1890's, when the spread of the idea of imperialism had created among the nations of Europe a fervent desire to peg out claims for the 'unoccupied' territories of Asia and Africa.

To turn first to Germany. Already during the Bismarckian era the German Government had entered the race for colonies under the impulse of economic pressures. It was, however, the Iron Chancellor's fall from power that marked a definite change in German foreign policy. Abandoning the 'line to St. Petersburg' which Bismarck had so carefully maintained, Kaiser William set upon an ambitious design which sought to convert the land-mass from the Bosphorus to the Persian Gulf into a German economic protectorate. By attempting to cut across the lines of Russian policy in Asiatic Turkey, the Kaiser earned for his country the implacable hostility of St. Petersburg.

How did England react to the German Drang Nach Osten? From the very commencement an inner contradiction dominated the British attitude towards the Kaiser's Turkish orientation. Finding it impossible to neutralise
Russian influence over the Porte single-handed, the Foreign Office welcomed German involvement as something that would work against Russian ambitions over Turkey, and call into existence a point of friction between Berlin and St. Petersburg. At the same time, if pursued to its logical culmination, the German drive towards the East meant the establishment of a European Power on the Gulf. Such a consummation would have invalidated the basic premises of British policy in the region.

The above analysis explains the British attitude towards the Baghdad Railway scheme, which spear-headed German economic penetration in the Middle East. Once assured to its vital interests - control over the south-eastern section of the line, and the participation of British capital in the project on terms of equality - the Foreign Office was prepared to look upon the enterprise in a favourable light. However, when the negotiations of 1903 assured to England all that she considered essential, Anglo-German co-operation was found impossible because of the hostility with which powerful financial interests in the country looked upon any scheme involving collaboration with Germany. Yet so pressing were the reasons which necessitated co-operation with Germany in the construction and control of what would be the shortest
highway to India, that British statesmen soon revived the issue, initiating a diplomacy that resolved the problem on the eve of World War I.

III

The influence of the economic antagonism between England and Germany, which the assumption by the latter country of the industrial leadership of Europe at the turn of the twentieth century brought to the forefront, is also discernible in Anglo-Russian relations in the Gulf. As Russia's hold over Persia strengthened, British statesmen, who had throughout the nineteenth century manœuvred to preserve the integrity of the Shah's dominions, executed a volte face, and approached St. Petersburg with a proposal that involved the de facto partition of the country, reserving for England control over the provinces adjacent to the Gulf and Baluchistan. When the British proposal was turned down by a St. Petersburg which saw the whole of Persia in its grasp, a demand was voiced by certain interests in England that the Gulf be sacrificed to Russia as the price of an entente that would enable England to concentrate on her most formidable rival, Germany. Under the energetic leadership of Curzon, however, the Government of India barred the way to a policy of appeasement
In the Gulf British statesmanship refused to succumb to commercial pressures, as it did in the case of the Baghdad Railway during the crucial deliberations of 1903. Nevertheless, Russian ambitions presented England with a grave threat, and came near wrecking the premises of her policy in the region. The deliberations of the Inter-Departmental Conference of 1902 point to the seriousness of the situation, and reveal the extent to which England was prepared to retreat in the face of Russian pressure. For all its aggressive tone, the Lansdowne declaration of 1903 signified more the degree to which a region traditionally dominated by England was threatened by Russia, than the initiation of an offensive by the British Government. It thus represented the nadir of British influence in Persia. However, Russian involvement in the Far East soon enabled England to turn the situation to her advantage, and though the agreement of 1907 was not a complete vindication of the British stand, it denoted a marked improvement over the situation of 1903.

In the absence of contact with the European Powers, the Arabian peninsula presented less of a dilemma to England than Persia. With British naval preponderance over the Gulf unchallengeable, Turkey
exercised a tenuous sway over Najd and its maritime provinces only as long as the British did not bother to interfere with the status quo. Strategically, England held the peninsula in her hands, which explains her reluctance to increase her commitments in Arabia so long as the maritime states under her protection were left alone. The Imperial Government's refusal to support 'Arab nationalism' as embodied in the anti-Ottomanism of the Al Saud, can be attributed to the same factor.

As one surveys British policy in the Persian Gulf, a pattern of motivations comes to light which moulds the discrete problems analysed earlier into a coherent whole. Anxious to eliminate alien influences from the lines of communication to India, England sought to maintain for herself a monopoly over the Gulf and the littoral areas flanking it to the north, the south, and the west. This objective determined British policy towards all the questions reviewed in course of our investigation; namely, Russia's attempts to gain access to the Gulf; the politico-economic expansion of Germany in Asiatic Turkey; and, last but not the least, the rise of an incipient nationalism in Arabia.