Abstract

Geostrategic Importance of Persian Gulf

1. Introduction

This thesis which is submitted for the award of the PhD, tries to analyze the Geostrategic Importance of the Persian Gulf Region. The Middle East and its sub-region, Persian Gulf region, have long been amongst the most volatile regions of the world and major centers of world affairs; strategically, economically, politically, culturally, and religiously sensitive areas. The location of the Persian Gulf has given the region a significant economic and strategic position. Both the Middle East and Persian Gulf region remain areas of unresolved and dangerous conflict involving the external powers, arms proliferation and ethnic and religious hatreds that go back centuries. Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are the states around this water basin. The Persian Gulf and its coastal areas are the world's largest single source of crude oil and related industries dominate the region. Due to their huge oil and gas resources, the regional states play a significant role in global economy and these natural wealth have made the region very important from the geostrategic point of view.

Persian Gulf and Regional States
World demand for energy continues to grow propelled in part by the booming economies of Asia. Furthermore, oil and natural gas are the primary drivers of the entire global economy, both in the developing and developed worlds. The world therefore faces the coincidence of increasing demand for energy and growing dependency on dangerous and unstable regions. Furthermore, the new patterns of Asian demand will invariably mean that different Asian countries will establish their own political and economic ties with the Persian Gulf countries.

As geological exploration and new extraction technologies become more sophisticated, it is clear the world is well endowed with fossil fuels; coal, oil and natural gas. The problems of getting new energy to market are primarily economic and political. For the foreseeable future, the importance of Middle East oil and natural gas supplies will increase and the Persian Gulf will continue to be the most significant repository for reasonably priced energy. Persian Gulf States hold 55 percent (728 billion barrels) of the world's crude oil reserves and access to the region's oil is critical to Western, indeed global, prosperity. Yet because of the expected untapped energy resources of the region, the local players and the key external powers realize that if political conflicts can be resolved, an economic bonanza could transform the region.

To understand the contemporary geostrategic relevance of oil and gas resources of the region, the researcher has attempted to study and analyze the geopolitics of the regional states, regional order, and contemporary conflicts of the region, geostrategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz and the role of Iran and USA as two major powers of the region.

2. Statement of Problem

Since the Portuguese invasion of Persian Gulf, in 1507, this small part of the world has become one of the most critical regions of the world. The importance of the region increased after the withdrawal of Britain in 1971, and expanded after Iran-Iraq War; 1980-1988. Gulf War in 1990 and Iraq War in 2003 have made the region more unstable.

During Cold War era; before Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, in an attempt to gain some control of the oil of the region, Washington developed special relationships with the two foremost oil producers, Iran (under the Shah) and Saudi Arabia. In February 1979, Islamic revolutionaries overthrew the Shah of Iran, eliminating the main guarantor of stability in the Gulf and the relation between USA and its main ally in the region changed from friends to foes.

Since 1991, the United States has become the preeminent global power. The collapse of the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe in 1989 and of the Soviet Union in 1991 had seen the main challenge to the United States in the international arena disappear. However, the threat of renewed Iraqi aggression in the Persian Gulf, as well as of Iran's rearment program and aspiration to be the dominant power in the region, meant that the United States faced threats to its own and global security. The importance of Persian Gulf oil to stability and prosperity has demanded a continued American role in the region.
The long-standing Arab–Persian conflict, Shiite-Sunni rivalry to dominate the region, consequences of the waged wars since 1980, extra-regional states’ presence in the region, disputed islands of the Persian Gulf; existed dilemma between Iran and Sharjah which could be the reason of the next conflict in the region, combined with the desire of neighboring states for control of large oil reserves seem the most important existing problems of the region.

3. Significance of the Study
In this research, the researcher has tried to gather information from the each and every party involved in the region. To avoid any bias, the materials which have been used are written by Iranian, Western and Gulf States’ authors. The researcher has shunned partiality which has, hopefully, made the study valuable and wishes that it will lead to further studies.

4. Scope of the Study
Persian Gulf is worthy to be studied of long ago. It has been an important trade route since ancient times and gained added strategic significance after the discovery of oil in the Gulf States since 1903. But to avoid making this study bulky, the researcher chose to focus on the period from 1970s onwards. Of course, in some occasions, it had to be referring to the events which had been occurred before this period, to explain the subject more precisely.

5. Objectives of the Study
The objectives of this research are as follows:
1. To understand the contemporary geostrategic relevance of oil resources of the region
2. To understand the contemporary geostrategic relevance of contemporary conflicts of the region
3. To understand the contemporary geostrategic relevance of Iranian role in the region
4. To understand the contemporary geostrategic relevance of American role in the region

6. Hypotheses of the research
The hypotheses of this research are as follows:
1. The study focuses on Geostrategic Importance of Persian Gulf, this region being the centre of conflicts in the Middle East. Iran and Iraq are the two dominant countries of this region. Both these countries have had conflicted relationship since Second World War. They have fought a prolong conflict in 1980s and continued to have strained relationship until Saddam Hussein was in power. The United States is an important extra-regional power that has considerable influence in this region. Since the disintegration of Soviet Union, the United States has played a significant role in this region, especially with reference to the First Gulf War (1990) and the Second Gulf War (2003). Iran has emerged as a major player in the politics of the Middle East, especially since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the containment of Iraq after the First Gulf War.
The Lebanon conflict of 2006 was an indication of an assertive Iranian posture in this region, especially considering the support given by Iran to the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

2. This study argues that order in the Persian Gulf is a critical necessity for stability in the Middle East. Such an order would be a product of the policies of two important players; Iran and United States, besides the other states of the Persian Gulf. Order in the Persian Gulf would ensure stability for the region of the Middle East and also in the long run, provide for containing the so-called Civilization Clash, which is emerging in the World today.

7. The Methodology of the Research

The methodology used for this thesis has been historical analytical approach, which makes use of observations based on past events. The main aim of this approach is to apply the method of reflective thinking to social and economic problems still unsolved by means of discovery of past trends of events; facts and attitudes.

To understand the contemporary geostrategic relevance of oil resources as well as current conflicts and disputes of the region and the relevance of two major actors that are playing very significant role in the region, Iranian and American, the historical analytical method seemed to be the best choice, because the mentioned method helps the researcher to study and analyze collected data from any involved parties.

Obviously the researcher has tried to conduct the research by avoiding any bias and partiality.

The researcher has used primary as well as secondary data. In initial stage, the researcher was determined to interview some concerned policy makers in the area (specifically Iranians), even the researcher spoke with some of Iranian military officers and requested to take appointment, but due to the strategic importance of the area, as most of the information is confidential, and current situation of Iran and the intensified tension over its nuclear program, the endeavors were in vain.

Therefore, information was gathered from the official documents and reports and studies which have been done on the region by reliable organizations and prominent scholars.

Some of the primary sources which have been used are as follows:

1. United Nations’ documents
2. Speeches of the regional or extra-regional characters who are directly involved in the region; such as President of Iran, President of USA, Commander of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard, US Chief of Army, Leaders of the Gulf States, etc. All the speeches have been quoted and the sources have been presented in the footnotes.
3. Official reports; such as the annual reports of USA Department of energy, World Bank, IMF, etc
4. Strategic documents; such as the documents published by OPEC, Iranian Oil and Gas Industry, etc
5. Relevant information published by well-known universities
6. Official letters issued by governmental offices
7. Reliable encyclopedias such as Britannica, Wikipedia and Encarta

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Some of the secondary sources which have been used are as follows:

1. Reference books written by experts
2. Text books
3. Reference journals
4. Unbiased newspapers
5. Reliable magazines
6. Neutral news agencies
7. Impartial websites
8. Related maps and tables, extracted from reliable sources

To avoid any bias, a large number of published materials, from all the involved parties, have been studied.

8. Chapter Schema

The thesis includes eight chapters as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Geopolitics of the Persian Gulf Region
3. Geostrategic Importance of the Persian Gulf Region
4. Geostrategic Importance of Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf Islands
5. Evolution of Regional Order of the Persian Gulf Region
6. Wars of the Persian Gulf Region Post 1979
7. Role of the USA in the Persian Gulf Region
8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Chapter One; Introduction

This chapter includes a brief Introduction of the region, conceptual framework, statement of the problems, the significance of the research, scope of the study, objectives and hypothesis of the study, methodology which has been used, arrangement of materials and finally a review of the literatures which has been studied to accomplish this research.

Chapter Two; Geopolitics of the Persian Gulf Region

The researcher has explained definitions of geopolitics and geopolitics of the region in second chapter. In this chapter all of the eight countries which surround the Persian Gulf have also been studied from the geopolitical point of view. Seven of these countries are Arab States, including Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. Iran as the only non-Arab state which is located in the north side of the Persian Gulf has the longest coastline with the Gulf.

The factors, such as their history, territory, population, religious and ethnic groups, military power, economy and the natural resources like oil and gas (and in some cases, which water scarcity is a main problem of the state, water resources have been studied too) and the impact of these factors on their policies has been examined.
Chapter Three; Geostrategic Importance of the Persian Gulf Region
Since the discovery of oil and gas resources in the region, not only the conditions of the regional states, but also their role in the global community have been changed. In this chapter, the oil and gas resources of all of the eight states of the region have been studied.
This section includes maps which are showing each regional state’s most important gas and oil fields.

Chapter Four; Geostrategic Importance of Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf Islands
Due to the role of the Strait of Hormuz in the policies and strategies of the regional states’, and even extra-regional countries presented in the region, one section of chapter four is allocated to this very important and vital chokepoint. The strait is not only very important for the states of the region, as most of their exporting oil and most of their importing commodities have to pass through this waterway, but also it plays a vital role in the global energy market.
Any kind of instability which threatens the flow of oil from this passageway will cause a significance impact in oil market.
In second section of chapter four, Iranian strategic islands, Arabian strategic islands and Persian Gulf disputed islands have been studied. This part contains maps of islands to clarify the islands’ strategic position.
Some of the Persian Gulf Islands have potential to be the reason of another conflict, or even war, in this vulnerable area. In this part the researcher has tried to conduct an impartial study and avoid any bias, therefore the claims and counterclaims of both parties, Iran and UAE, have been produced.

Chapter Five; Evolution of Regional Order of the Persian Gulf Region
Since the discovery of oil, 1908 onwards, the region has attracted not only the attention of the superpowers, but also the regional states themselves have tried to dominant the region. Amongst them, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia have tried to become the dominant power in the region. In this chapter the ambitions, goals, struggles and role of the USA, USSR and the three above mentioned regional states have been examined.
In Cold War era, Persian Gulf region was one of the most important centres of two superpowers’ competition and contest. Some of the political analysts in late 1970s believed that Persian Gulf region was the only vital region of USA and USSR strife. Therefore they were struggling to obtain higher position through increasing their influence on region’s states.
The Persian Gulf was far more of an American than of a Soviet sphere of influence. While Moscow had a close relationship with Iraq, it never really penetrated the region. There was virtually no direct Russian presence. USA by strengthening Iran and USSR by supporting Iraq accomplished the mentioned policy.
The end of the cold war and the disappearance of the threats the Soviet Union posed to the Persian Gulf have presented the United States with an opportunity to pursue a fundamentally different type of
strategy in that region: a policy of friendly but more detached and contingent relations with the regional states, in distinction to the existing US policy of close and enduring political, military, and personal ties with friendly regimes.

After Iraq War; 2003 onwards, the regional order of the Persian Gulf has been changed and some new conditions have dominated the region. Considering these issues and conditions indicates that there is no reliable and confirmed regional order in the region. As any instability and disorder in the region will definitely spread out all over the Middle East, a stable order accepted by the all actors of the region seems vital.

Chapter Six; Wars of the Persian Gulf Region Post 1979
Since 1979, the region has been instable due to three wars; Iran-Iraq War, 1980 to 1988, Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and USA invasion of Iraq, 2003 onwards.

Chapter Seven; Role of the USA in the Persian Gulf Region
Since 1971, USA has tried to fill the power vacuum that emerged after the Britain withdrawal of the region and America along with its allies is present in the region since operations to free Kuwait in 1991.

It plays a significant role in the regional, political and militant orders of the region. In chapter seven the researcher has studied US role and policy on Persian Gulf since 1971, the year of Britain withdrawal from the region.

In this chapter, the USA’s policy on Persian Gulf region, from President Nixon era to President Obama has been analyzed.

Chapter Eight; Conclusion and Recommendations
This chapter is a sum up of the information which have been gathered and analyzed as well as researcher’s findings and recommendations.

9. Conclusion
After conducting the research and studying, examining and analyzing the Persian Gulf region from geostrategic and geopolitics points of view, the researcher has concluded that both of the hypotheses of the research are valid.

This region has been the centre of conflicts in the Middle East. Due to the geostrategic changes in the last three decades the region suffered a prolonged period of tension and instability, with referring to Iran-Iraq War; 1980-1988, Gulf War;1990-1991 and Iraq War; 2003 onwards.

Iran is an important player in the Persian Gulf region; with refer to its nuclear policy, its dispute about Persian Gulf islands with UAE, threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz and its significant role in the Iraq security. Since 9/11, the Middle East issues have been the focus of international politics. Among the Middle Eastern countries, Iran’s role has also been at the centre of Middle Eastern issues, especially since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the containment of Iraq after the First Gulf War. As the conflict in the Middle East continues, attention turns to the influence of Iran over there.
Considering Iran’s political, cultural and geopolitics realities without focusing on any particular predominant factor, it can be seen as a nation that critically affects international politics in the Middle East because of its centuries-long profile in the region. A nation of 70 million, Iran is one of the largest oil exporters in the world. And with its long coastline, good highways and railroad links to Central Asia, it is a natural crossroads and trading partner. For Iran to hold that position, however, it must contend with some significant drawbacks; it is a Persian state in a region dominated by Arabs, and a Shiite Muslim nation surrounded, for the most part, by Sunni states.

In the years since the September 11 attacks and the onset of crisis in Iraq, Iran's consolidation of its political-security role in the Middle East, and its impact upon regional and international security systems has been the focus of attention in international and Middle East security studies. The prevailing view in the West and the Arab world is that new political-security and geopolitical developments have changed the balance in regional power and political structure in favour of Iran. Accordingly, this situation has had negative effects on the United States' strategic interests, its regional allies in the Arab world, and on Israel's position.

It also began forming alliances with its oil-rich neighbors along the Caspian Sea as well as with Russia and China to counter-balance US power in the region.

USA as an extra-regional state is a major power in the region with strong influence on the region’s politics. USA is presented in the region since 1991. From 2001 its presence became stronger by invading Iran’s eastern neighbour Afghanistan, where its troops are deployed and going to be increased. And since 2003 the western neighbour of Iran, Iraq, is also has been occupied by USA and its allies’ troops.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 had a tremendous impact on the regional politics. It proved that the Gulf's many small oil-producing states are largely incapable of defending themselves against larger players in the region. The US was working together with Saudi Arabia and this was followed by the forging of ties with individual GCC; Gulf Cooperation Council, countries. Iran's decision to remain neutral during the Iraq-Kuwait crisis resulted in an improvement in Iran's relations with the West and the GCC countries. Iraq remained weakened after its defeat in the Gulf War and until removal of Saddam’s regime in 2003 it was the biggest threat to the region’s stability.

The removal of Saddam has not removed all enmity toward the region, and it seems that a large continued extra-regional military presence and intervention threat has perpetuated that enmity. So there is a need of constructing a regional order that works and lasts. On the other hand this presence could be use to deter any state from violating the security and stability of the region. Maintaining a determined presence would demonstrate to any aggressive state that the United States and its allies, take the region’s security commitments seriously. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and its partners in the GCC are consumers of security, vulnerable to attack from larger, more powerful neighbors. The memory of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait should be sufficient reminder that threatening neighbors cannot be ignored.
Involving extra-regional states with a stake in a peaceful and stable Gulf, most notably the United States, Europeans, South Asians and Chinese, will be important for achieving long-term stability. Their geographical proximity to the Gulf, growing dependence on Gulf oil, importance to counterterrorism and non-proliferation, and abiding proclivities to be a partner with the United States on global problems all point to the need for including them in a stable structure in this sub region. This proves that the United States is an important extra-regional power that has considerable influence in this region. Since the disintegration of Soviet Union, the United States has played a significant role in the region, especially with reference to the Gulf War (1990) and the Iraq War (2003). The United States has placed substantial forces, to the east and the west of Iran, in Afghanistan and Iraq. For the Iranians, the current situation has posed a dangerous scenario. Iran is not concerned about these troops invading Iran. That is not a military possibility. Iran’s concern is that the United States will use current situation as platform to foment ethnic dissent in Iran. This concern has been strengthening after the Iranian disputed presidential election in June 2009. As USA has committed itself to the security of its regional Arab allies, no political settlements of Gulf conflicts are possible as long as these two countries, Iran and USA, remain adversarial. Hostility between the two states has been intensified and a Manichaean paradigm has been developed in both of them. Each one came to perceive the other as a mortal enemy in a zero-sum game. Anti-Americanism and anti-Iranian feelings became two sides of the same coin; of course these are the feeling of governments and not nations. The walls of mistrust have been built over decades and need to be deconstructed, brick by brick. This is not an easy task, but it is an essential one. The United States has also to assure the Gulf States that negotiation with Iran does not mean the withdraw of its forces from the region and their security is not the price of US-Iran rapprochement. This study also argues that order in the Persian Gulf is a critical necessity for stability in the Middle East. Such an order would be a product of the policies of two important players; Iran and United States, besides the other states of the Persian Gulf. Order in the Persian Gulf would ensure stability for the region of the Middle East and also in the long run, provide for containing the so-called Civilization Clash, which is emerging in the World today. An unstable regional balance of power is likely to force the United States to remain militarily active and could accelerate Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons. A failure to reform governance in the Gulf States and the Middle East could permit political instability and in the end undermine any security system. Before Islamic Revolution in Iran, in 1979, regional order of the Persian Gulf region was a triangle shaped by Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Iran’s policies in the region and Middle East, as a pro-Western state, were in favor of USA and its allies. Iraq, as a pro-Soviet state, also was a dominant country of the region and Saudi Arabia due to its huge oil reserves, one of the highest in the world, had and still has the power of influence on regional policies.
After Islamic Revolution and due to a prolong war with Iraq, Iran became weak and almost lost its position as a dominant state of the region. Iraq also had been weakened by the long period of sanctions imposed by USA and most of the Western countries; therefore it seemed that the stage was ready for Saudi Arabia to become the region’s unique dominant power. The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq altered the situation and to respond the Gulf States’ demand, USA entered the region.

During recent decades, preserving a 'balance of power' policy between the regional actors has been the basis of American foreign policies in the region, especially in the Persian Gulf. The recent developments have unbalanced power equations in favor of Iran.

Since 2003, the year of removal of Saddam and regime change in Iraq and most importantly USA’s more firmed presence in the region, another triangle was formed; including USA, as an extra-regional state which replaced Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The US, by regime change in Iraq, helped Iran become the biggest military power in the region after Israel. On the other hand the US presence in the region which firstly was in response to the Gulf States demand for confronting Iraq and now to maintain the stability of the region, is being opposed by the government of Iran. It believes that this will intensify the tension and instability in the region and the regional disputes must be solving by the regional states. But regional states have accepted that US and its allies force has removed the greatest source of insecurity to the Gulf and in doing so, the regional balance of power has again been shifted as a consequence the action, although US presence has caused expanded opposition in the cultural and political spheres. It is essential that Tehran accept it so, because Iraq was the major threat to Iran, in particular.

The researcher has concluded the followings as some findings and recommendations:

1. To restore the peace in Persian Gulf Region and ultimately in the Middle East, two major actors; Iran and USA, must cooperate. To re-establish stability and security in Middle East and Persian Gulf region, both USA and Iran should change their policies.

USA must offer more carrots in its carrot and stick policy. At the first step, the imposed sanctions, which are bothering Iranian people, should be stopped. Nevertheless, reality requires Washington to begin considering not if, but the extent of an Iranian role in the region that the US and its allies can agree to. This may necessitate a paradigm shift in Washington's approach to Iran and the Middle East, but failure to reconcile with Iranian demands justified by the new balance in the region will likely disable USA administration from turning political opportunities into real diplomatic breakthroughs; irrespective of their positive intentions.

Iran has to modify and moderate its policies, especially its nuclear policy. Without these main actors’ cooperation, any attempt to establish and maintain stability in the regions will be failed.

2. The existed border disputes, dilemma over the sovereignty of some of the Persian Gulf islands, interfering in each others’ internal issues by the regional states and existed hostility between some of them must be solved and removed, immediately, as any and each of the mentioned issues could become the source and reason of another conflict or even a devastating war in this critical and violated region.
3. A stable regional order in the Persian Gulf is a critical necessity for stability in the Middle East. Such an order would be an outcome of the policies of Iran, United States and the other states of the Persian Gulf. Order in the Persian Gulf would ensure stability for the region and eventually for the Middle East.

The Gulf States' hopes for stability have been severely challenged in recent years, first by Shiite Islamic Revolution in Iran and then by Hussein in Iraq. Result from these and other threats during this period has been the formation of closer more involved relationships between the Gulf States and the United States. The Gulf States see this as a source of encouragement yet are still concerned about the long term impact of a western presence.

Today, the security preference of most Gulf governments is to re-establish the kind of balance of power in the Persian Gulf they once felt comfortable under, a balance maintained by friendly relations with a major regional power and backed up by a more distant US presence.

The researcher, also, has concluded that the best path to establish regional order in the Persian Gulf region is to restore a sort of balance of power which would be consisted of Iran, Saudi Arabia and United States of America as an extra-regional power.

USA has two advantages to do so, as follows:

1. A very strong influence on regional politics.
2. The power to deter any aggressive state which may have tendency to violate the region.

As the final words, the researcher hopes that the thesis, findings and recommendations propounded provide food for thought and lead to further studies.