

US POST 9/11 PERSIAN GULF POLICY: IRAN'S CONCERN AND OPTIONS

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Abstract

The geo-strategic and economic significance of the Persian Gulf region since World War II has figured prominently in the national security concerns of the US as part of its policy to check the influence of the Soviet Union. Iran, as "the Gulf policeman", and close US ally, had played a pivotal role in achieving that objective. But their ways separated after the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 when friendship turned into rivalry for the control of the region. The differences became more tense in the post 9/11 scenario. US opposition to Iran's nuclear programme and its campaign to prevent Iran from gaining influence in the Persian Gulf has constituted an important element of its foreign and national security policies since then. The Obama administration considers Iran's nuclear programme as the main impediment in the long-standing objectives of the US in the region.

Introduction

This paper is a critical analysis of the US' expansionist policy and its active role in the politics of Persian Gulf. The end of World War II marks the advent of America's political commitments in the Persian Gulf. Those commitments led to greater involvement and interdependence between the United States and the Persian Gulf states. America considers itself the "Guardian of the Gulf", a role that has been manifested in policy doctrines, covert actions, and diplomatic and military reactions to crises in the region. The main objective of USA was to prevent the growing influence of Soviet Union in the region.

The region, because of its geographical perspective and its large oil deposits, assumes a special status in the national security strategy of the United States. Iran, due to its historical, geographical, economic and strategic position, is considered to be the key to regional stability and security of the Gulf region. Iran does not want instability and insecurity in the region. What jeopardizes stability of the region is the difference in perceptions of Iran and the US regarding the Persian Gulf security. The Islamic Republic of Iran wants the region to be free of trans-regional powers and it claims that regional security should be established by regional countries. The Arab countries in the Persian

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Gulf region do not have a common understanding of the Persian Gulf security and they lack the trust that collective security in the region requires. Therefore, it seems improbable that they would be able to participate in collective security arrangements in the short term to establish stability and security in the Persian Gulf region. This, in turn, provides the US with the opportunity to expand its policies in the region.

Apart from oil, the US has many vital concerns in the Gulf region like countering terrorism, eliminating the threat of weapons of mass destruction, ensuring the stability of friendly states, and so on. The continued and perpetual US presence in the Persian Gulf region is a matter of grave concern for Iran and she wants to contain US expansionism and its territorial ambitions in the region. Like any other region, the Persian Gulf region also needs security which should be achieved through cooperation by all regional countries and those countries that are dependent on oil. The security and stability of the Persian Gulf region can be achieved only when countries in need of fossil energy and the countries around the waterway are able to develop and share a deep understanding of their inter-dependence.

The paper gives a brief history of US policies in the Persian Gulf since World War II to the incident of 9/11 and examines the US expansionist policy and its active involvement in the politics of the region since then. This paper while focusing more on the policy toward the region during the Obama administration, analyses US policy towards Iran, especially since 9/11, and charts its developments in the wake of the 'War on Terror'. The study also dwells on the policy options of Iran in response to the US policy changes in the region. The respective viewpoints of the US and Iran are explained with a view to enabling the readers to gauge the depth of their differences. The study also discusses some of the existing challenges that Iran faces from the US stance. In the light of this discussion an effort has been made to find what might be the likely future of US-Iran confrontation and its adverse effects on the region.

Historical Overview of US Post World War II Persian Gulf Policy

The Persian Gulf region, because of its geographical perspective and its large oil deposits, assumes a special status in the national security strategy of the United States. But the Soviet effort to spread Communist influence in the Persian Gulf was the main stumbling block in the way of USA's long standing objectives in the region. In order to stop the expansion of communism in the Persian Gulf region, USA supported those countries of the Middle East whose territorial integrity and independence were threatened by the Soviet Union. From 1945-71, USA actively supported its ally Great Britain against the Soviet Union to safeguard the latter's interests in the Persian Gulf. However, the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf by 1971 made it the US' main

concern. The United States was convinced that the western interest in the stability and security of the Persian Gulf could only be safeguarded with the help of friendly local governments, led by Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two 'Pillars' of the Persian Gulf which alone could keep the Soviet Union out of the Persian Gulf.¹ In order to prevent Soviet expansion and to increase her future influence in the affairs of the Persian Gulf region, USA adopted a policy, which came to be known as the "twin pillar" policy. According to this policy, both Iran and Saudi Arabia were designated as US surrogates for the security of the region and American national interests there. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran shared American anxieties about Soviet expansion in the region. So the Shah, who desired to make Iran the paramount power of the region and the "Policeman of the Persian Gulf", identified with the objectives of the United States.²

However, the fall of the Shah at the hands of the Islamic Revolution together with the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan compelled the US to redefine its role in the Persian Gulf. Keeping in view the growing Soviet threat on one side, and the fear of Iran's Islamic Revolution on the other, the USA engineered the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 to enhance security cooperation and to contend with economic and political concerns of the region. Since 1979, America has pursued five broad security objectives in the region: containment of the Soviet Union, containment of Islamic revolution in Iran, developing military relations with GCC, ensuring Israel's security and keeping open the access to oil. Additional arms sales, including five AWACS aircraft, to the Saudis reflected the change. Saudi policy preferred to keep the US forces "over the horizon" so as not to antagonise other Gulf States and avoid possible disruption within its own traditional society.³

In the post-cold war period, the United States has followed a policy of dual containment towards Iran and Iraq. The object of the dual containment policy is to isolate these regimes politically, economically, and militarily. The policy of dual containment is spelled as "the culmination of a trend toward an increasingly direct American strategic role in the gulf."⁴ Officials in the Clinton

¹ Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh, *Political Geography of the Strait of Hourmouz: The Evolution of Iran's Role, 1970s and 1980s* (London: University of London, 1990), 5.

² C. Paul Bradley, *Recent United States Policy in the Persian Gulf (1971-1982)*, (Grantham, NH: Thompson Rutter, 1982), 133.

³ Donald E. Nuechterlein, "U. S. National Interests in Middle East: Is the Persian Gulf a Bridge Too Far?," *Naval War College Review* (October 1987): 117.

⁴ F. Gregory Gause, "The Illogic of Dual Containment," *Foreign Affairs* 73, no.2 (March/April 1994): 59.

Administration, “have tried to justify ‘dual containment’ in historical terms,” as a logical progression of US policy in the region.⁵

In the wake of the 1991 Operation Desert Storm and the liberation of Kuwait, Washington ditched its old “balance of power game”⁶ for dual containment, to isolate and weaken the aggressive regimes in Iran and Iraq.

President Clinton embarked upon a national strategy of engagement and enlargement. By engaging nations through “preventive diplomacy”⁷ (support for democracy, economic assistance, military presence, military-to-military contacts, and multilateral negotiations) America could focus its resources “where it can make the most difference”. Enlargement was described by the Clinton Administration in the following terms: Our national security strategy is based on enlarging the community of market democracies while deterring and containing a range of threats to our nation, our allies and our interests.⁸

In the words of Secretary of Defense William J. Perry “in short, the Gulf in 1991 was a prime example of America’s ability to fight a war, and the Gulf in 1994 was a prime example of our ability to prevent one.”⁹ Clinton Administration’s primary focus in the Gulf was to “reduce the chances” that any nation would threaten the sovereignty of any of the GCC states. In addition to American presence in the Gulf, the US strategy calls for helping the GCC nations maintain a collective defense.¹⁰

US Post 9/11 Persian Gulf Policy: Security Commitments

The American leaders believe that the 9/11 incident has exposed the US vulnerability and that terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism and the governments supporting them pose a threat to US security. Today, terrorism is seen as a threat to the international system. Terrorism can destabilize several countries in the Persian Gulf region which in turn can destabilize the region itself. Radical Islam which has led to the spread of violence in the world can create crises in the important and strategic region of the Persian Gulf as a result of which interests of countries including the US can be seriously harmed. The spread of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons in the Persian Gulf region poses a threat to the US forces in the area. During the Iran- Iraq war, chemical weapons were used by Iraq against Iran as a strategic

⁵ Jubin H. Goodarzi, “Dual Containment: Origins, Arms and Limits,” *Middle East International*, no. 507 (25 August 1995): 20.

⁶ Martin Indyk, quoted in Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), 261.

⁷ White House, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (US Government Printing Office, Washington DC, 1995), 7.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ William J. Perry, “Working with Gulf Allies to Contain Iraq and Iran,” prepared Remarks to the Council of Foreign Relations, *New York Times*, May 18, 1995.

¹⁰ White House, “A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement,” 31.

deterrent against Iranian forces that were used to compensate for the weakness of Iraq's military forces. The US¹⁰ war of 2003 against Iraq was justified as an effort to prevent Iraq from further developing the alleged WMDs. The strong opposition of the US to Iran's nuclear activities also has to be seen in this context. In addition, the United States has developed close relations with the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf region. It concluded several agreements with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and the United Arab Emirates after the 1991 Persian Gulf war. According to these agreements, the United States has to defend these Arab states against all hostile acts. Therefore one should not be surprised if the United States, which claims worldwide interest in democracy and human rights, supports these undemocratic states of the region.¹¹

After the Cold War, especially in the wake of 9/11, the United States, led by the neo-conservatives, was inspired by the 18th century realist philosopher Thomas Hobbes for gaining greater power in the globalized world. This approach results in constant war.¹² Accordingly, it was assumed to be the responsibility of the big powers to play the role of 'International Police' and set up order and ensure security. In order to assume this responsibility, the US must ensure that other countries do not assume more power and to do so it was necessary to control them. Oil and controlling the oil lines were the objectives to bring other players under the US leadership. The US opposition to Iran's nuclear programme and its campaign to prevent Iran from gaining strength is the basic element of US foreign and national security policies. Failure to reach an understanding on these issues with Iran in this sensitive and strategic region has led to the expansion of US relations with regional Arab countries while at the same time it tries to restrict and isolate Iran within the Persian Gulf region. However, with the change in the US leadership and the exit of neo-conservatives from the White House, it can be expected that new conditions will emerge to bring about a shift in US policies in the Persian Gulf region.

The other pillar of US Persian Gulf policy is the network of formal and informal security commitments to the southern Gulf States. The Southern Gulf is effectively a US military protectorate. Regional sensitivities prohibit the United States from permanently basing its military personnel in the gulf countries, but approximately 10,000 to 15,000 troops associated with the Fifth Fleet and rotational air force deployments in Saudi Arabia are in the region at any given time, plus troops participating in exercises. The United States also has large quantities of pre-positioned equipment in Kuwait and Qatar and is

¹¹ W. Murphy Richard and F. Gregory Gause, "Democracy and US Policy in Middle East," *Middle East Policy* 5, no. 1 (1997): 59.

¹² Mohammad A.Kadivar, "Liberalism & Conservatism in Thomas Hobbes' Thought," *Political & Economic Ettef'at* 5, no. 6 (2005): 88-89.

negotiating for permission to move additional equipment to the United Arab Emirates. US military presence in the gulf is ostensibly intended to protect friendly countries from the growing danger of Iran's nuclear ambition. USA is seriously concerned about the development of Iran's nuclear programme. USA is using a number of strategies to obstruct Iran's nuclear programme which it regards as a great handicap for its long-standing economic and strategic objectives in the Persian Gulf region. As the security of the Gulf States is apparently the main concern of USA, Iran's success in developing a nuclear capability would be a serious threat to this objective.

Barak Obama's Persian Gulf Policy

The cornerstone of President Barack Obama's Persian Gulf policy was the promise of "a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect" and "a new partnership" in the Middle East.¹³ But Defence Secretary Robert Gates's June 2009 message to GCC defence ministers suggested that the Pentagon had no plan to make any significant change in the Gulf Security Dialogue. Instead, Gates reiterated US commitment to its founding pillars of regional stability, energy security, counter-proliferation, and counterterrorism.¹⁴ Iran, as a preemptive safeguard, has been trying to set up a coalition of support with the EU, Saudi Arabia, Russia, China, India and others against which US efforts have run into various snags. The nature of US-Iranian relations is now one of confrontation in silence.¹⁵ The US continues its annual naval exercises in the Persian Gulf. The Obama administration is actively working with Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf allies to speed up the supply of arms to the region and rapidly upgrade the defences for oil terminals and other key infrastructure against any future military attack from Iran. The initiatives, including a US-backed plan to triple the size of a 10,000-man protection force in Saudi Arabia, are part of a broader push that includes unprecedented coordination of air defences and expanded joint naval exercises between the US and Arab militaries. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are leading a region wide military build up worth more than \$25 billion in US arms purchases in the past two years alone. US Secretary of State for Foreign Relations Hillary Clinton's July 22, 2009 proposal to extend a US "defense umbrella" over the Persian Gulf states¹⁶ signifies a shift away from the Bush administration's desire to see the GCC states able to maintain a more autonomous collective military capability.

¹³ Barack Obama, "Inaugural Address," January 20, 2009; idem, interview, *Al-Arabiya* (Dubai), January 27, 2009.

¹⁴ "Robert Gates' Speech to US Central Command", June 24, 2009.

¹⁵ Paul Sullivan, "US-Iran Relations Since 9-11: A Monologue of Civilizations," *Alternative* 1, no.2 (Summer 2002):198.

¹⁶ *New York Times*, July 22, 2009.

Under President Obama, the Department of Defense has further announced arms sales to Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia totaling more than \$4 billion. The 2010 quadrennial defence review (QDR) may signal further changes in the US commitment to Persian Gulf security. In reality, these arms deals have spurred the GCC to help in Iraq. In July of 2008, William Burns, US under secretary for political affairs, praised the "new support and cooperation from (Iraq's) Arab neighbors," attributing it to "the readiness of the Iraqi government and security forces to confront Iranian-backed groups."¹⁷ For the Obama administration, the cooperation represents tangible progress against Iran at a time when the White House is struggling to build international support for stronger diplomatic measures, including tough new economic sanctions. US support for the buildup has been kept low-key to avoid fueling concerns in Israel and elsewhere about an accelerating conventional arms race in the region. The expanded cooperation includes new US agreements with Saudi Arabia to help establish a facilities protection force under the country's Interior Ministry to harden defences for oil facilities, ports and water desalination plants. The new force is expected to grow to 30,000 personnel and will be used to deter attacks by Iran or Iranian-inspired terrorist groups.

Washington is providing access to technology and equipment for the improvement of Saudi defence forces. Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are also undertaking multibillion-dollar purchases of US-made defensive systems. In the past two years, Abu Dhabi has topped the list of foreign customers for US arms, buying \$17 billion worth of hardware, including Patriot antimissile batteries and an advanced anti-missile system known as Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). Three other Middle Eastern countries are considering buying the same systems. The UAE, which recently bought 80 American-made F-16 fighter jets, last year, was invited for the first time to participate in the US Air Force's Red Flag exercises at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. The small Gulf country is in the process of negotiating the purchase of French Rafale fighter jets.¹⁸ The country's build-up has impressed US military officials, who say the US-allied Emirates have emerged as a military power in their own right. In a speech in Bahrain last year, US Central Command chief Gen. David H. Petraeus said the UAE air force alone "could take out the entire Iranian air force, I believe."¹⁹

The Obama administration has expanded the land- and sea-based missile defensive systems in and around the Persian Gulf to counter what it

¹⁷ William J. Burns, "Testimony before the House Foreign Relations Committee," *Washington Post*, July 9, 2008.

¹⁸ Joby Warrick, "US Steps up Arms Sales to Persian Gulf Allies," *Washington Post*, January 31, 2010.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

sees as Iran's growing missile threat. The deployments include expanded land-based Patriot defensive missile installations in Gulf countries, as well as navy ships with missile defence systems within striking distance in and around the Mediterranean. General David Petraeus, who as head of US Central Command is responsible for military operations across the Middle East, said that the United States has stationed eight Patriot missile batteries in four Gulf countries -- Kuwait, Qatar, UAE and Bahrain.²⁰ The US military is planning new defence strategies in the Persian Gulf with the object of deterring a possible Iranian attack. The White House Aegis cruisers capable of shooting down Iranian medium-range missiles now patrol continually off the coast of Iran. In addition, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates have agreed to accept missile defence systems from the United States that would be capable of deterring a possible attack from Iran.²¹

Thus, Iran is completely surrounded by countries occupied by the US forces like Iraq and Afghanistan or supported by it as the Arab States that provide bases for US military and installations. Contrary to the statements of President Obama, Iran is already well contained militarily "that is why Iran must be provoked into a military reaction by a triggering pre-emptive strike". It is possible that these aggressive US actions will eventually force Iran's government to act out militarily, giving the US military the 'defensive' excuse it's been waiting for. The stationing of Aegis cruisers may be provocative, but certainly not aggressive as long as they are not involved in a pre-emptive attack to deter a predictable Iranian counter response to an Israeli pre-emptive strike, to which then the offensive cruise missile capability could be added. US is also sending aircraft carriers to join the two already in the Gulf (USS Enterprise and USS Stennis). The Pentagon has indicated that they are prepared to send the USS Nimitz to the Gulf. The transfer of the Nimitz is being contested by Commander Admiral Fallon.²²

The Gulf Arab states have only recently begun to express uneasiness with a nuclear- powered Iran. Loath to provoke Iran by denying its right to nuclear energy capability, the Gulf Arabs now speak openly of their concerns about Iran developing nuclear weapons, in view of Tehran's insistence upon full-cycle control of uranium enrichment and the possibility of as many as 20 more nuclear power plants strung out along the northern shore of the Gulf. They not only want to prevent Iran from using a nuclear weapon against them in the future, but their present fear concerns environmental damage from a Chernobyl-style accident or natural disaster (such as an earthquake at a nuclear

²⁰ "US Expanding Missile Defenses in Gulf," *Washington Post*, January 31, 2010.

²¹ "US Improving Persian Gulf Missile Defense," *Wiki News*, February 2, 2010, <http://celebrifi/gossip/us-imprving-resian-gulf-missile-defense-1497061/.html>

²² Joel Skousen, "Obama, The New NeoCon-Military Confrontation Rising," <http://www.rense.com/general89/obmme.htm>

plant built on or near a fault) and Iran's lack of responsibility or preparation for consequence management in such an event. Finally, the Gulf Arabs are greatly worried that the United States might launch a war against Iran or negotiate security issues with Iran without consulting Gulf friends and allies.

To counterweigh Iran's nuclear aspirations, the Gulf Arab states have announced their interest in acquiring nuclear energy facilities similar to Iran's civilian nuclear energy programme. The GCC states control almost half of the world's known oil reserves and have no need for any other source of energy but several Gulf States have expressed interest in nuclear energy for domestic energy consumption.²³ Both USA and Israel presently focused on the threat from Iran would oppose any further nuclear proliferation in the Persian Gulf region.

There has been much talk of a substantive change in the US approach towards Iran under the present administration. From the Iranian perspective, however, the long-term US approach to the regional balance of power in the Gulf region remains largely unchanged. For over half a century, US policy in the Middle East, and, especially, in the Persian Gulf, has been to maintain a balance of power while preventing regional supremacy. The Iranian leadership therefore perceives Obama's overtures to Syria as a continuation of the policy of the Bush administration to isolate Iran and contain Iran's ability to influence regional politics. Obama's tactical visits and public diplomacy in Turkey and Egypt, as well as his conciliatory pronouncements toward the broader Islamic world, are all seen as efforts to shore up regional support against Iran and weaken its ability to withstand international pressure. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei expressed this perception when in reply to Obama's Persian New Year greeting he stressed that a change in Iranian attitudes would be contingent on "genuine" and "real" changes in the US position vis-à-vis Iran.²⁴

All that Tehran wants is to reduce the threat posed by the US presence in the region through cooperation and engagement. Towards this end Iran has decided to adopt a win-win game approach. It has been very cautious and avoided any direct engagement with the US in any conflict whether in Iraq or anywhere else in the Persian Gulf. On the other hand, in its relations with other major actors in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Iran has pursued a strategy of maintaining amicable relationships mostly through reassurance and cooperation. For instance, Iran has attempted to advance

²³ Judith S. Yaphe, "Challenges to Persian Gulf Security: How Should the United States Respond?," *Strategic Forum, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defence University* (November 2008): 3, <http://www.ndu.edu/inss>

²⁴ Ali Akbar Dareini, "Iran Leader Rebuffs Obama Overtures," *Washington Times*, March 21, 2009, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/mar/21/iran-leader-spurnsobama-overtures/>

regional cooperation by actively participating in regional conferences on the crises in Iraq and Lebanon.

By pursuing this policy, Tehran wants to warn other states in the region about the cost of helping the United States in any possible future military operations against Iran that would disturb the security of the entire region. The future of US-Iran bilateral relations in the Obama era depends very much on how the Obama administration deals with its perception of Iran's potential for threatening regional peace and stability in the years to come, given the history of its response in Afghanistan and Iraq. It would be difficult for US-Iran relations to make any headway as long as the Obama administration continues its policy of circumventing Iran by cultivating regional rivalries in order to pressurise Iran to cede ground on the nuclear and other outstanding regional issues.

Strategic Encirclement of Iran: US Main Objective

The United States has been in a confrontationist mode with Iran ever since 9/11. American military strategy in the Persian Gulf, therefore, has been aimed at the strategic encirclement of Iran and checkmating its military development. US believes that Iran is clandestinely pursuing efforts to gain nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons capabilities, in spite of its treaty commitments against such activities. Improvements in Iran's missile delivery capabilities are adding to the perceived threat to US interests in the region.²⁵

At present, with the United States military presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the strategic encirclement of Iran by America seems to be complete while its relentless propaganda against Iran's emerging nuclear programme seeks to unnerve Iran in its international diplomacy.

Since 9/11 Iran has been more concerned with the new security challenges posed by the US military presence across Iran's national borders in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although the geopolitical changes following the Iraq and Afghanistan crises place Iran at the centre of the region's politics and have created various new opportunities, they are also a source of serious challenges for Iran's national security. While the empowerment of the Shi'a and Kurdish groups in Iraq's governance has strengthened Iran's role in the region, it has at the same time resulted in unprecedented developments such as ethnic rivalries, Sunni extremism, growing threats of a religious and civil war, the probability of territorial disintegration, and the spread of insecurity and instability across the region. Furthermore, the ongoing tensions surrounding the issue of Iraqi federalism remain a matter of great national security concern for Iran. An Iraq consisting of smaller and weaker parts would provide a basis for the increased

²⁵ Elain L. Mortin, "Thinking Beyond the Stalemate in US-Iranian Relations," *Issues and Analyses Atlantic Council II* (July 2001), www.acus.org

influence of Iran's regional rivals (e.g., Israel) in areas such as Iraq's Kurdish region or Iran's backyard.

Challenges to political sensitivities and rivalries among regional countries have also been emerging along Iranian borders. Fear of Iraq's fading Arab identity has, for instance, prompted Saudi Arabia to be more active in the Shi'a and Kurdish issues.²⁶ Turkey is now more interested in the Shi'a and Sunni issues involved in Iraqi federalism, and Jordan and Egypt infamously warned against the creation of a "Shi'a crescent" with Iran's leading role in the region. Since Iran is generally supposed to be the next target of United States' pre-emptive military intervention, it is necessary to know the exact objectives of such an eventuality. The demonizing of the Iranian nuclear weapons programme and the massing of American power on all of Iran peripheries since 9/11 have added credence to the Iranian claims of being encircled by USA. Iran remains in America's cross-hairs at a time when the US military presence in the region is at its greatest. The US has recently installed upgraded Patriot missiles at Qatar, the largest US base in the Gulf besides US Navy ships that are capable of destroying Iranian missiles in flight. The US Patriot missile systems, which originally were deployed in the region to shoot down aircraft, have now been upgraded to hit missiles in flight. The US now has eight Patriot missile batteries stationed in the Gulf region — two each in four countries, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar.²⁷

Iran is militarily not in a position to match the military predominance of USA. Its missile arsenal does not have the strike capability to hit mainland USA. Nor does Iran have force projection capabilities. Yet Iran figures significantly in United States' threat assessment focusing on West Asia and the Gulf Region in particular. Even if Iran develops nuclear weapons, it still does not have any chance to match the nuclear might of the United States. Still the United States regards Iran as a military threat to the peace and stability of the Gulf Region.

Actually behind this threat perception is the security of Israel which is a paramount concern of the United States' Middle East policy. Iran's nuclear weapons would pose a serious threat to the existence of Israel. But it is not difficult to see how Iran can ever contemplate such a move when it knows it would be a national suicide for Iran, keeping in mind Israel's own nuclear weapons arsenal and the American nuclear weapons deployments in the Gulf region.

It is suspected Iran could supply a nuclear device to Islamic Jihadi terrorists as Iran is blamed for being a state-sponsor of terrorism. In the US

²⁶ Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran and the Shi'a Crescent: Myths and Realities," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* XV, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2008): 87-99.

²⁷ Nasser Karimi, "Iran Says Strengthened US missile Defense System in Gulf Aimed at Sowing Regional Division," *Politics News*, February 2, 2010.

view Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons could lead to a nuclear weapons race in the Gulf region and a nuclear strike by any side could lead to disruption of global oil supplies from the region. Iran could cripple the Hormuz Straits to achieve the above objectives.

However, peace and stability in the Gulf region face no threat from the present Iranian military build-up. What has been of greater concern all along since the Iranian revolution is the Iranian politico-religious model of governance which is in sharp contrast to the monarchical governments in the Gulf with their significant Shia communities. The questions that this situation poses are: Would the United States be content with military strikes against Iran's nuclear weapons production capabilities only? Or, would the United States also aim for the destruction of Iran's military capabilities, especially Iran's missile arsenal and naval capabilities to disrupt the Hormuz Straits? And the biggest question is, can the United States hope for a regime change in Iran having successfully achieved the above two ends?

Regime change in Iran is an imperative for United States strategic interests in the Gulf region if Iran emerges as a regional power. Therefore, the steps in the United States' strategy to achieve the above objectives would be to militarily destroy Iran's nuclear weapons production capabilities and also degrade or disintegrate its conventional military capabilities.

The United States has only two military options to achieve its end-game objectives against Iran, namely: Limited war and a major conventional war. Limited war is a likely option only in terms of limited strategic objectives. In this case it would be the destruction of Iran's nuclear weapons production capabilities and degradation of its missile arsenal and naval capabilities in the Hormuz Straits, both of which can be successfully executed by the United States. A major conventional war against Iran by the United States is an attractive proposition for American hawks, in which United States may have all the material resources except the manpower to conduct such a large-scale war. Further, the spill-over military and political implications would emerge manifold to impede United States' military progress. The "Iraq quagmire" as existent today following the American Blitzkrieg of 2003 should act as a damper to any American military adventurism against Iran.

The United States needs to balance Iran's threat perceptions centering on the United States with its legitimate security interests in the Gulf region. Iran poses a politico-strategic threat to USA in the Gulf region and not a military threat in the foreseeable future. The United States therefore needs to remove Iran from its military cross-hairs and place Iran in the United States politico-strategic cross-hairs.²⁸

²⁸ Dr.Subhash Kapila, "Iran in the United States Military Cross-Hair," *SAAG* (South Asian Analysis Group), paper no.1298 (March 23, 2005).

By drawing a broader circle of security, therefore, Iran has linked its security with regional dynamics, enhancing its role to tackle the current threats emanating from its immediate security environment. This has been the key to Ahmadinejad's foreign policy approach in his first term and, in all likelihood, will be continued in his second. The essential point to note is the linking of Iran's nuclear programme with the broader regional dynamics. In this way, his government and the Iranian political elite have sought to package together Iran's nuclear programme with the outstanding regional disputes and Iranian security concerns in order to afford Iran greater strategic value and bargaining power in any future negotiations.

Iran's Concern and Options

Iran's coast is 1259 kilometers long along the Gulf and has a large number of islands which can facilitate the protection of the Strait. Iran also has an edge over other countries in the waterway from the naval and technological point of view. Iran's selection as a "Policeman of the region" during 1970 by the US confirms Iran's potential for security in the Persian Gulf.²⁹ Iranian government believes that the security of the region should be maintained by the Persian Gulf states and not by foreign powers. Iran has the largest population, largest land mass, largest military, oldest culture and civilization, and as the economic engine of the region is the most advanced in application of science and technology. Iran believes that the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the preservation of security and stability in the Gulf cannot be achieved without its cooperation. Iran wants to expand its influence in the region, but, it is not interested in territorial expansion. With a greater role, effective responsibility, and mutual cooperation it can be helpful in bringing stability to the region. With this object, establishing bilateral and mutual economic, cultural, and political security agreements with neighboring states will be helpful.³⁰ Iran's engagement in Iraq is aimed at pre-empting future challenges. Rather, it seeks to build its clout through a policy of aggressive outreach short of war—by building and backing support networks throughout the region; providing political support and economic assistance to key actors; bolstering trade and commercial ties with neighboring countries; and signing security and defence agreements. In implementing its policies, Iran operates on two intertwined principles that underwrite its ability to build networks of surrogates, intimidate

²⁹ Amir Sajedi, "Iran's Role in the Security of the Persian Gulf," *Nedai Daneshgah*, no. 20 (2004): 122.

³⁰ Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Iran Unveils a Persian Gulf Security Plan," *Asia Times*, April 14, 2007, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/ID14Ak04.html

opponents and critics, influence governments, and make foreign policy: the first of these is plausible deniability, and the second is deliberate ambiguity.³¹

Tensions between the US and Iran are escalating because of Iranian nuclear programme and allegations that Iran is assisting Shia Muslim militias and insurgents in Iraq. In response to this, the US has adopted a very provocative posture in the shape of significant display of naval forces with three US Navy carrier battle groups operating in or near the Persian Gulf. A US Navy carrier battle group consists of a collection of seven to 10 ships. The primary platform is the aircraft carrier and all the other ships and submarines in the group to support or defend the carrier. Every ship entering the Persian Gulf must pass through the narrow channel known as the Straits of Hormuz. This 200 km-long, horseshoe-shaped passage is very narrow (less than 50 km wide at its narrowest points) and bordered by Iran to the north and the United Arab Emirates and Oman to the south. The collision between a US Navy attack submarine and a Japanese super-tanker in January 2007 was caused by the tight quarters of this channel. By then, the aircraft carrier (the USS Kitty Hawk) was well within the range of the submarines' weapons. Additionally, the US Navy has leased a sophisticated diesel-electric submarine and crew from Sweden for the last two years in an effort to improve their anti-submarine warfare programme.

With more than 2,450 kms of the Persian Gulf coastline, Iran needs a robust navy and maritime defence. Iran operates three diesel-electric submarines that it purchased from the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s. These boats carry mines and several different kinds of torpedoes. Although these submarines would be vulnerable to detection in the open waters of the Persian Gulf, loitering in shallow waters near the coastline will make them much harder to detect. This type of submarine has proven elusive to US Navy anti-submarine warfare. In October 2006, a Chinese submarine tracked an US carrier battle group engaging in exercises off Okinawa. Only when the submarine surfaced did the US become aware of its presence. The Islamic Republic Guards Corps (IRGC) maintains a surface maritime force independent of the Iranian Navy that includes about 30 large fast attack craft and more than 40 smaller and faster 'swarm' boats. The fast attack craft are gunboats with a top speed in excess of 35 knots, carrying an array of large and small calibre guns, anti-ship missiles and shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles. The 'swarm' boats are Swedish-built Bog hammer lightly armed patrol craft and Chinese-built high-speed (50 knots) catamarans that carry only one gun and a battery of eight anti-ship missiles.

The Iranian Air Force (IAF) consists of older fighter and attack aircraft. Short on parts, training and an integrated air defence system, the IAF would be outmatched by US frontline fighter aircraft. But since some of the aircraft

³¹ Judith S. Yaphe, 2.

can carry anti-ship missiles, the IAF warrants the allocation of US defensive assets. Iran possesses an extensive inventory of anti-ship missiles that can be fired from ships, aircraft and either fixed or mobile land launchers. With ranges up to 150 km, nearly all of the Persian Gulf and the entire Straits of Hormuz are within reach of Iranian missiles.

Iran has two types of anti-ship mines; the old floating design and a new design that is positioned on the sea floor and consists of a cluster of mines. When activated by a passing ship, one or more mines launch from this underwater platform into the underside of the ship. Sheer numbers and the lack of corresponding resources to find and defeat them make the mine threat even more dangerous. Iran has three small coastal submarines. These boats are 30 m in length and are armed with torpedoes. They would be effective in the coastal waters of the Persian Gulf as well as the Straits of Hormuz. Their presence would strain the carrier battle groups' anti-submarine warfare assets.

A weapon showcased in recent Iranian war games is a high-speed (195 knots) short-range (7 km) torpedo. Such a weapon launched in proximity of US Navy forces would be very difficult to defend. Iran's defence doctrine is to make an attack against it very painful, so military and technological superiority may not be sufficient to completely protect the US Navy operating in the Persian Gulf. The sheer volume of weapons that the Iranians can bring is the most formidable threat to the US fleet.³²

Iran has several options: it could disrupt oil shipments from the Persian Gulf; attack US Naval assets in the region; or engage in subversion and terrorism against US allies and interests. Iran could disrupt oil exports and shipping in the Gulf. According to a recently published US defence intelligence assessment, "Iran's navy . . . could stem the flow of oil from the Gulf for brief periods by employing a layered force of diesel-powered KILO submarines, missile patrol boats, naval mines, and sea and shore-based anti-ship cruise missiles."³³

Iran currently views security in the region as a non-zero-sum game in which the best action for securing Iran's national interests is to advance a win-win game approach. Iran thinks that it could be a successful deal between USA and Iran to avoid future possibility of war between the two countries and to bring them on a common and accommodative consensus which will be equally beneficial for both the countries. From Iran's perspective, therefore, a feasible middle ground is to help the United States to secure its interests without an excessive regional presence. The strategic value of this deal is to establish a new kind of balance of interests and balance of security between Iran and the

³² *Jane's Intelligence Digest*, February 23, 2007, jid.janes.com

³³ Michael Eisenstadt, "The Challenges of the US Preventive Military Action," *The Washington Institute of Near East*, <http://www.Microsoft.Com/isapi/redir.dll?prd=ie&a=r=hot.mail>

United States. In this respect, Iran's previous cooperation with the United States and other regional actors in settling the Afghanistan crisis in 2001 is a vivid example.³⁴

Tehran simply seeks to minimize the threat posed by the US presence in the region through cooperation and engagement. In this manner, Iran has decided to advance a win-win game. Similarly, Iran has been very cautious not to engage directly in any conflict with the United States in Iraq and the Persian Gulf. Regarding the relations with other major actors in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Iran has pursued a strategy of maintaining amicable relationships mostly through reassurance and cooperation. For instance, Iran has attempted to advance regional cooperation by actively participating in regional conferences on the crises in Iraq and Lebanon.³⁵

Impact of US-Iran Tension on Pakistan

The ongoing tension between the US and Iran in the Persian Gulf region has an adverse impact on Pakistan's security perspectives. First, it would disturb peace and create law and order situation in Balochistan, the largest province of Pakistan. Balochistan connects Iran with Pakistan and the Baloch insurgents would be happier to find a patronizing power who may be seeking to create chaotic situation in Pakistan and who might wish to see Pakistan destabilized internally.³⁶

Also in the escalation of US-Iran tension in the region leading to US military strikes on the Iranian nuclear installations at Isphahan, Natanz, Arak, and Bushehr, the ill effects on the environment could easily affect Pakistan. There could be a stream of refugees or terrorists entering the border region into Pakistan. Besides this, Pakistan's Balochistan is now undergoing a high pace of development process that could become inaccessible to foreign investors.³⁷

Moreover, the US-Iran tension would also have an adverse effect on Pakistan's trade with Iran. Iran has a great quantity of oil and gas; a large portion of Pakistan's total imports involve purchase of crude oil which stands at 97.5 per cent of its total exports to Iran.

³⁴ Mohsen Milani, "Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan," *The Middle East Journal* 60, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 246-247.

³⁵ "Kuwait Conference: 20 Regional, Int'l Events but Did They Bring Security, Stability to Iraq?," *Iraqi News*, April 23, 2008, http://www.iraqinews.com/conferences/kuwait-Conference-20-regional-intl-events-but-did-they-bring-security-stability-toiraq.html?Itemid_126

³⁶ Mohammad Ayub Khan, "What Should We Do," *Frontier Post* (Peshawar), March 2, 2002.

³⁷ Dr. Maqsoodul Hassan Nuri, "Iran-U.S Nuclear Crisis: What Islamabad Can Do," *Dawn* (Karachi), June 24, 2006.

The escalation of US-Iran tension in the region will either force Iran to stop supply of crude oil or to increase the prices of oil which will adversely affect Pakistan's trade and commercial relations with Iran, which is already insignificant as Pakistan's trade with Iran has never exceeded 3 per cent. And above all, it may jeopardize the construction of the Pakistan-Iran Gas Pipeline Project, which is, perhaps, the most constructive aspect of Pak-Iran economic relations.

More significantly, such tension would greatly encourage Jundullah, a militant organization which reportedly enjoys American support and cooperation. USA is supporting this organization in an attempt to put pressure on Iran to give up its nuclear programme. This group is involved in brutal acts of terrorism inside Iran like the suicide bombing in Zahidan and killing of Iranian security guards. The ongoing US-Iran tension is seen with deep concern in Pakistan. Pakistan has already paid a heavy price in the US-led war in neighbouring Afghanistan and does not want similar instability and insecurity on its Western border with Iran.

Conclusion

The security and control of the Persian Gulf has remained a core objective of US foreign policy since World War II. From Truman to Nixon, the United States' role has changed from supporting the British against the Soviet Union to that of a major player in the strategic dynamics of the Persian Gulf. The withdrawal of British forces in 1971 produced a major challenge to the US interests in the region leading her to decide upon a more active role in the Gulf to protect her economic, political, and strategic interests and to prevent the external threat from the Soviet Union. The development of Iran and Saudi Arabia, as "twin pillars", and US surrogates in the region after the British withdrawal further consolidated the USA position as "the sole Guardian and Custodian of Persian Gulf". As a result, US succeeded in preventing Soviet influence or its expansion in the Persian Gulf region. However, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 together posed a serious threat to America's long-standing objectives in the region. These developments made USA more concerned about the security and stability of Persian Gulf. The idea and the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 came about to counter the twin threat. By this policy, USA succeeded in containing the future influence and expansion of these powers in the Gulf. Generally speaking, since 1979 American policy in the region has been based on five broad security objectives: containment of the Soviet Union, containment of the Islamic revolution of Iran, developing military relations with GCC, security of Israel, and unbroken access to Gulf oil.

In the post-cold war period, the United States has followed a policy of dual containment toward Iran and Iraq. Its object is to isolate these regimes

politically, economically, and militarily since these two nations have posed a serious challenge to a NATO- type military posture and the overall security of the surrounding Gulf States. The dual containment policy has thus resulted in the “the culmination of a trend toward an increasingly direct American strategic role in the gulf.”

The present American administration sees Iran’s nuclear programme as the main impediment in its long-standing objectives in the region. These potential conflict situations raise significant risks for future US policy in the Gulf. Apart from oil, the US has many vital concerns in the Persian Gulf region like countering terrorism, eliminating the threat of weapons of mass destruction, ensuring the stability of friendly states primarily Israel, its close ally in the Middle East and so on. USA’s naval superiority in the region and its intention to destroy Iran’s nuclear programme by establishing its own hegemony in the region has become a matter of grave concern for Iran. In addition, the US doctrine of pre-emption which placed Iran in the “axis of evil” paradigm has added a menacing edge to the situation. More significantly, US strategic advantage over Iran in terms of its anti-tactical missile system, its upper hand over Iran in air defense capabilities through its B-52s which can destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities have added to Iran’s threat perceptions. On its side, the Iranian air defence is the weakest link in its overall defence system with the acute shortage of operational aircraft and a weak radar control capability that allows US ally Israel to have an air supremacy over it.

Today in the Persian Gulf, the US and Iran are engaged in what could be called "gunboat diplomacy". There is also mounting concern among Gulf States regarding a US military confrontation with Iran over its nuclear programme. Such a confrontation might have a devastating impact both on the region’s economy, ecology and the security of the GCC states.■