

**Maritime Security Challenges In The Arabian Gulf
In US-Iran Confrontation Context**
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Introduction

Historically oceans have been acknowledged as a vast reservoir of sustenance. Accordingly oceans have been exploited for feeding as well as to lubricate the industries and are regarded as the first choice for transportation. Now oceans are not only used as source of food, energy, mineral resources and recreation but they are being used to support most of the global trade. As a matter of fact the most effective and viable advantage of seas has been its use as highways for commerce across the globe. At the same time they are of strategic importance as they act as both a barrier to and a conduit for threats to the security of people everywhere. In today's global economic integration more than 80% of world's trade is through sea and 90% of the general cargo is transported in containers.

On the other hand if we look into the nature of challenges and the issues of globalization confronted in the post 9/11 period with particular focus on the changing concept of security and notions of emerging threats, shipping and related infrastructure are seen as more vulnerable to attacks by elements seeking to destabilize the maritime domain. The security threats are more pronounced in the global maritime trading hubs and choke points i.e. (harbours and straits). According to a research report of Joint Economic Committee of US Congress, "75% of the world's maritime trade today is passing through a handful of international straits and canals. Shipping and trade routes are vulnerable to security threats, of which the Arabian Gulf (Strait of Hormuz) is most vital."

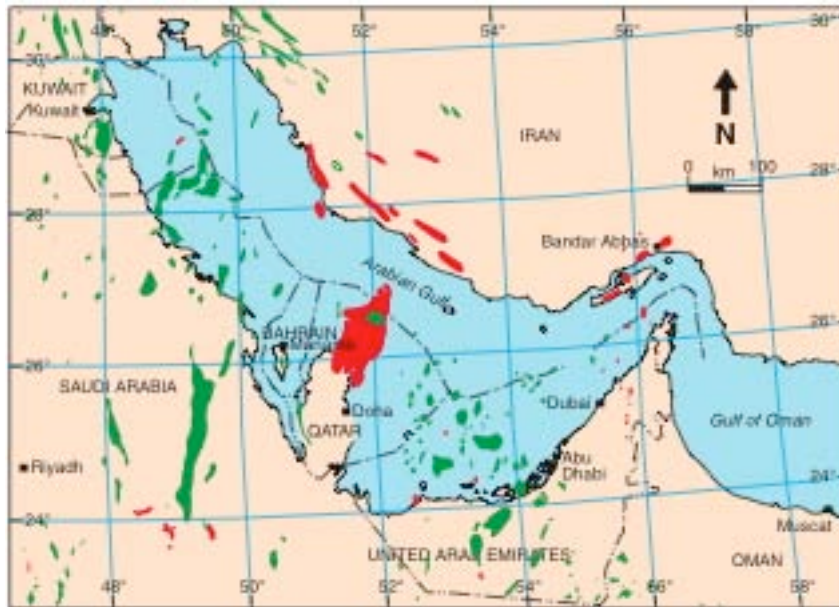
This paper begins by looking at the importance of the Arabian Gulf,

particularly focusing on the role of Strait of Hormuz in global economy. Then it looks more specifically into the traditional socio-economic problems & security issues (such as interstate conflicts) being faced by the region, noting the effects of new threats to the maritime security in the Gulf such as maritime terrorism, Iran-US tension & the effects of the prevailing environment on the region. The present security situation has been analyzed in the light of Iran-US tension and the possible effects of any military misadventure in the region.

The paper is not exhaustive. It focuses in particular on Iranian Navy and IRGC(N) for two reasons, first, Iran is the largest & very important state in the region, having 10% of the world known oil reserves. Iran also harbors the world's largest known natural gas reserves after Russia. It is capable of playing an important role in regional politics as well as in international politics. Secondly, the ongoing tension between US and Iran chiefly due to Iranian nuclear programme takes top position on the maritime security agenda items along with other security issues confronted in the region. More importantly, US-Iran stand off has direct bearing on the world economy and global security situation. The depiction of prevailing trends and fears along with understanding of environment will assist to analyze the security situation in the Gulf region for a workable solution.

The Arabian Gulf

The Arabian Gulf, commonly known as "Persian Gulf" is an inland sea. It is in the south Asian region and is an extension of the Indian Ocean, located between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula. Its length is 989 km (approx 500 NM) with an area of approx 240,000 Sq Km. Average width of the Gulf is about 240km (approx 105 NM) and minimum width is 54 Km (approx 29 NM) at its narrowest, in the Strait of Hormuz. At its narrowest point the shipping lanes consist of two-mile wide channels for inbound and outbound tanker traffic as well as a two-mile wide buffer zone.



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The countries sharing coastline on the Arabian Gulf are (starting from south east) United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain (Island). Kuwait & Iraq are located in the North West. Iran is located in the north occupying the longest coastline of the gulf: 2440 kilometers.

There are also various small islands located within the Arabian Gulf among those Qeshm Island, Tunb Al Kubr (Greater Tunb), Tunb Assugha (Lesser Tunb) & Abu Musa , which are more widely known. Some of these islands are subject to territorial disputes among the Gulf littoral states. The Arabian Gulf and its costal areas are the largest single source of crude oil and produce approximately 27% of the world's Oil. Oil related industries dominate the region.

Importance of Arabian Gulf

In today's global environment, safe and free flow of energy trade is of paramount importance. In this regard, with 55% of the proven global oil reserves the Arabian Gulf region plays a significant role. Furthermore 18% of the world's liquefied natural gas also transit through the Arabian Gulf while 40% of the world's known natural gas reserves are also found in the Gulf region. At this point of time (2008), Iran possesses the world largest known natural gas reserves after Russia, while most of the offshore gas fields in the Gulf belong to Qatar. The Arabian Gulf is also endowed with good fishing grounds having abundant pearl oysters. Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain have developed substantial commercial fishing industries on the Gulf coast. Extensive coral reefs are also found in the Gulf.

By the turn of the 19th century, Great Britain enjoyed complete autonomy in the region. The Gulf area came into lime light after the extraction of oil in this region and its subsequent export to the rest of the world.

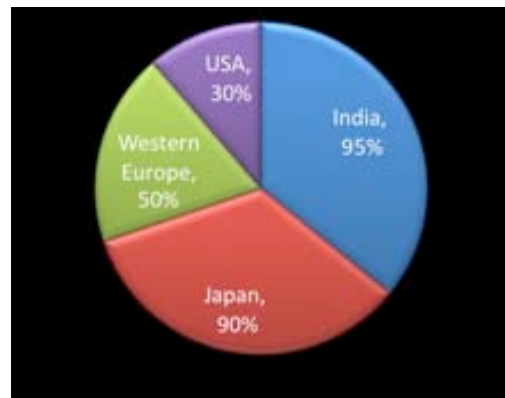
Another factor that enhances the importance of the Arabian Gulf is the Strait of Hormuz.



It is a narrow water-way that connects the Arabian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. It is the world's second busiest international water-way, after the Strait of Malacca and the world's most important oil choke point. As many as 1,500 large and small vessels are sailing at any time in the shallow and constricted water of Gulf & Strait of Hormuz.

Merchant ships carrying grains, iron ore, sugar, perishables and containers full of finished goods also pass through this strategic sea corridor route to Gulf countries and major ports like Dubai. 2.9 million deadweight tons (DWT) pass through the Strait every year. 27% of transits carry crude on oil tankers, rising to 50% if petroleum products, natural gas and Liquefied Petroleum Gas transits are included. Dry commodities like grains, iron, ore and cement account for 22% of transits. In short, the lifeline of the regional & global economy depends on the tankers traffic, which passes through the Strait of Hormuz.

The combined export of oil from Gulf countries in 2006 was 18.2 million barrels per day. Saudi Arabia is the main exporter followed by Iran with the net export of 2.5 million bbl/d (1). In 2006, the whole region produced 24.5 million bbl/d, about 33% of the world's total. In the first half of 2008, the daily seaborne oil flow was 16.5-17 million barrels, roughly 40% of all seaborne traded oil on the earth. In addition, 18% of the world LNG transit through the Strait of Hormuz. Thus the per day oil trade from Hormuz is by far the largest in the world as compared to any other Strait (2).



The majority of oil passing through the Strait of Hormuz travels to Asia, the United States and Western Europe. Currently, three-quarters of all Japan's oil needs pass through this Strait. Containers passing through the Strait of Hormuz carrying finished goods & food products to Gulf countries account for 20% of transits. In total, Nearly 17,520 tankers, about fifty a day, pass through the Strait yearly. The EIA predicts oil exports passing through the Strait will double to 30/34 million barrels per day by 2020.

The world's economic giants are largely dependent on the Gulf region for the fulfillment of their energy needs. India, Japan, Western Europe and United States import 95%, 90%, 50% and 30% of their crude oil requirements respectively from this region, while the Chinese trade passing through the region is now in excess of 100 billion dollars with a growth rate of 10% per annum.

Security Challenges In Arabian Gulf Region

Since the colonial era the vast resources and economic potential of the Gulf region have been subjected to multifaceted domestic, regional and international threats and vulnerabilities. There exists today the perception that the presence of external regional naval forces in the region, rather than contributing to stability and economic prosperity for littoral states, are a cause of the pervasive insecurity of this resource-laden maritime environment. The geo-political situation has for the past two decades significantly constrained a natural development process in the region, and stunted economic growth besides the oil flow, while nurturing insecurities and an arms race.

Territorial Disputes

Owing to the geography and resource potential, the region has always been strategically important. Territorial disputes in general and the ownership of islands by littoral states have been perennial, and can be understood from the maritime context. Some of the disputed areas/islands have been major stopping-off points for sailors sailing up and down the Gulf for centuries. According to historical records these islands were also used for fishing and for the grazing of livestock while minerals (red oxide (Hematite) deposits were recently found on Abu Musa Island.

The rivalry between Persia (now Iran) and the local rulers of the Arab Gulf Sheikhdoms goes back to the 16th and 17th centuries. Claims of territorial sovereignty over these islands have been the cause of many conflicts. The latest Iranian claim occurred when the Shah, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-1979), declared Abu Musa, Lesser and Greater Tunb, as part of his Empire. Yet, for decades they had been under the rule of small Sheikhdoms of the Truicial States (present day UAE).

Iran and the United States, at the time the protector of the Iranian regime, had well recognized in the early 1970s the growing strategic and economic importance of the Strait of Hormuz. Both countries tried to wrest maximum control of the Strait from the feudal rulers of the gulf. The Iranian navy forcibly occupied Abu Musa Island just a few days before the formation of UAE. The matter went to the United Nations but a compromise was reached in a 1971 agreement signed between Iran and the emirate of Sharjah (one of the seven emirates of the UAE) with a face saving token joint-sovereignty of the island. Notwithstanding, the same year Iran also occupied Lesser and Greater Tunb. In April 1992, it expelled all foreign workers from Abu Musa asserting full control of the island (3)). Then in 1994, a combined operation of Iranian Army, Navy and Air forces brought Abu Musa under the control of the Iranian military, where it is now alleged that Chinese silkworm anti-ship missiles have been positioned. Thus, currently, all the ships passing through the Strait of Hormuz are de facto under the watch of the Iranian Navy.

Iran-Iraq War and Its Legacy

Iran-Iraq War ,one of the most deadly wars of the modern history, had far reaching effects on the stability, security and political environment of the region.

The original driving factor behind the war was a territorial dispute for access to the Shatt al Arab.



Shatt-al-Arab has always been of critical economic importance to Iraq being the only direct access to the sea and the major waterway for Iraqi trade, particularly that of oil. The war, which started on September 1980, soon became a conflict between two different visions of the Islam. The war lasted eight years and provoked more than one million deaths.

Iraq being unable to deliver a fatal blow to the Iranian regime (Iraq was then supplied by the Western powers opposed to the Iranian regime), the war ended abruptly in September 1990, with Iraq voluntarily relinquishing its claim over the Iranian part of Shat Al-Arab it had seized in the earlier days of the war.

Both Iraq and Iran had resorted during the conflict to various tactics known today as the ‘Tanker War’, which highlighted the vulnerability of the energy flow passing thru the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. And among the far-reaching consequences of the war, one was to focus the mind of the western nations on maritime security in the Arabian Gulf and to bring their own navies in this part of the world. Nearly thirty years later, they are still there.

The Tanker War

In 1982, Iraq was the first to attack the Iranian oil terminal at Kharg Island.