

Iran's Geopolitical Influence in the Persian Gulf: The Consequences of its Post-Islamic Revolution Strategic Policy

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This study has no aim to hurt any ideological or ethnic segment within any state or society but is written only for academic purposes.

Abstract

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has deftly pursued a nuanced and balanced strategic policy aimed at ensuring its long-term survival. This post-revolutionary Iran has adopted a pragmatic foreign policy approach, skillfully harmonizing its ideological underpinnings with the imperatives of safeguarding national interests and projecting its intrinsic sources of power. Iran's geopolitical situation is often characterized as intricate and delicate, given its pivotal location and rich natural resources in the Persian Gulf region.

To bolster its international standing and recapture a sense of historical eminence, Iran has orchestrated a deliberate management of its influence and evolution in the region, employing a multifaceted combination of both soft power and hard power instruments. Consequently, the smaller states in the Persian Gulf harbor concerns over Iran's expanding capabilities in both soft and hard power. Concurrently, the burgeoning alliance between the United States and the Arab States of the Persian Gulf is a source of apprehension for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In its quest to maintain strategic equilibrium and exert regional hegemony independently, Tehran has artfully devised a comprehensive strategy. This strategy involves the strategic use of public diplomacy to enhance its soft power, which is aimed at projecting its image onto the regional canvas, and the astute utilization of various tools to bolster its hard power, thereby upholding equilibrium within the region.

This paper undertakes a meticulous examination of the interplay between Iran's soft power and hard power in the context of its strategic policy vis-à-vis the Persian Gulf region, all while considering the array of geopolitical concerns and constraints that shape its actions. Additionally, it traces the Islamic Republic of Iran's regional policy, which is marked by strategic pragmatism, and evaluates its ramifications on the geopolitical dynamics of the Persian Gulf. The research methodology employed herein is primarily descriptive-analytical, with a substantial reliance on secondary sources for data acquisition.

Introduction

Iran occupies a strategic position in the Middle East due to its size, demography and resources. Being a power of the Persian Gulf region, it has the potential of gaining a position of arrangement and decision-making in the region. However, the Iranian policies showed an inclination towards the West during Shah's regime but post-revolution Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini promoted the idea of a strategically independent Iran. After 1979, Iran efficiently washed its hands of Shah's pro-US policy for guarantees and support for its national security aimed to take full advantage by increasing its globe of influence in the region (Kennedy, 2008, p. 14). Since the revolution, Iran's effort of being neither east nor west, in its geopolitical alignment not only triggered competition among the powers but also altered the power balance in the Persian Gulf region (Toossi, Feb. 11, 2014). This study is a qualitative analysis of the assumption that Iran's strategic policy to be a great power in the Persian Gulf region also urged the other states in the region to build up their military potencies to protect themselves from regional and international actors. It also analyzes the key question of how Iran's policy of strategic independence has influenced its policy towards the Gulf States. The paper also evaluates the future prospects of Iranian influence during the 21st century and the effects of the presence of external factors in the region particularly, the US.

Geopolitical Significance of the Persian Gulf and Iran's Strategic Position

The Persian Gulf as a part of the Middle East enjoys a unique geopolitical significance in the world. Its length is 865 km and width is 370 Km which spans from the Oman Gulf in the South to the marshes of Shutt-al-Arab in the North. Being in connection with the open Arabian Sea to the Indian Ocean, it sets as a bridge between Africa, Europe and Asia and this connectivity makes it vulnerable to regional and global powers (Long, 1978, pp. 18-19). The coastal area of this water basin is the hub of the world's largest reserves of proven oil (40%) (R, 2014, p. 100). Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and UAE being the countries around the water basin of the Persian Gulf are playing a vital role in the global economy due to vast reservoirs of oil and gas. A new pattern of energy demand is not only establishing political and economic cooperation of Persian Gulf states with Asia and Europe but is becoming a cause of active penetration of the outside powers in the region (Bojarczyk, 2012, p. 91). On one hand, there is a growing conflict over the nuclear program of Iran, an arms race among the Gulf States and penetration of superpowers in the region and on the other, the region has been destabilized by rising ethnic, religious and cultural differences by economic fluctuations of the regional states (Potter & Sick, 2002, pp. 1-2).

Since 9/11, the Persian Gulf is under the focus of international powers and due to geostrategic changes in the Middle East, the position of the region has become even more significant globally at large. Iran has acquired a position of a major player in the region due to its geopolitical position, disputed nuclear policy and conflicts with UAE and its position has become a serious concern for the United States of America (USA), its allies in the Arab world and Israel. The USA has been playing an important role in the region since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and its presence even became stronger since 2001. The United States has placed its forces in the east and west of Iran and committed itself to the security of its Arab

allies. The presence of the USA in the Persian Gulf had maneuvered the overall security agenda. The regional states other than Iran had accepted the USA and its allies as the source of removing insecurity and instability in the Persian Gulf. This was an alarming situation for Iran and the presence of the USA in the region was disliked and opposed by the government of Iran, as she believed that regional states should solve their regional disputes themselves and the American presence would intensify the tension and instability in the region. Despite its fear of the USA, initially, Iran supported her to minimize the threats posed to her security like facilitating the USA in Bosnia by transporting armaments, against the Taliban in Afghanistan and against Saddam Husain in Iraq. However, "Iran always wanted to minimize the threats posed by the presence of the USA in the region. Iranian elites believe that after some kind of strategic settlement with the USA, Iran would become the part of regional security system that would make the best use of the country's national security (Toossi, Feb. 11, 2014). But when Iran felt exclusion and threat by the USA then it sought to raise the costs of its exclusion by making it more difficult for the USA to achieve its strategic interests in the region" (Toossi, Feb. 11, 2014). For instance, Iran supported attacks by its proxies against the USA interests and interfered in Israel and Palestine conflict and then Syria and Yemen crisis (Robinson, May 27, 2021; Parker & Noack, January 03, 2020). Iranian policymakers believe that Iran has paid a price for preserving regional security without gain receiving appropriate gain in return but any possible future military operation against Iran would result in greater instability in the entire region as Iran would not accept any intervention at the expense of her security (Barzegar, 2010, pp. 173-189).

It is quite evident that the USA presence has enhanced the Iranian opposition in political and cultural spheres yet Iran is also looking for an alliance with the oil-rich neighbors along with the Caspian Sea states as well as Russia and China to counter the USA power in the region (Adib-Moghaddam, 2006, p. 5). Additionally, the involvement of extra-regional states like the USA, the EU, Russia, South Asian States, and China as stakeholders is making the geo-strategic position of the region more vulnerable.

Defense Strategy of Iran

Iran's defense policy mainly focuses on the following defensive doctrines;

Regional Military Power and Mosaic Doctrine: Firstly Iranian determination is to be a regional power projecting the capability of influence in the Middle East and beyond. Iran, at the same time, not only wants to put off various threats to its security but also has a desire for the achievement of self-reliance in all areas of national life (Eisenstadt, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic Iran*, 2015, p. 3). Iranian policymakers believe that Iran is a leading power in the Persian Gulf by its impression of geography, demography and natural resources endowment and also can control the Gulf militarily. They also believe that the international system of power underpinned the USA since the Second World War but now the USA hegemony in the region is in decline making Iran a rising state. To fulfill this desire Iran is seeking an alliance with anti-status quo powers such as Venezuela and trying to modernize its force and expand its

military capability. Iran under the 'Mosaic Doctrine'¹ created a new Basij militia and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was trained to a guerrilla war against invaders (Alfoneh, 2008). In addition, "Iran cultivated Jihad culture, build oil and gas pipelines with neighbors and established ties with Shiite Muslims all over the world" (Eisenstadt, 2015, p. 5). Iran also devoted a large budget to enhance its military capabilities since the end of its war with Iraq but the USA sanctions and financial constraints have prevented Iran from achieving her goal. Consequently, it is relying on their means that provide big bang for its limited defense budget.

Hard Power Strategy

In international relations, the term hard power is described as an ability of a state to use an economic incentive or military strength to influence others' behaviors; therefore hard power is based on military involvement, economic sanctions, coercive diplomacy even threat and war for the aim to build pressure or protection (Ho, 2018, p. 57; Nye, 2004, p. 5; Gallarotti, 2011, p. 29; Wilson, 2008, p. 114). Since the Islamic revolution, Iran primarily sought a strategy to achieve hard power to deter its opponents but it still has not built the image of a large capable conventional military appropriate with the regional power (Azad, 2017, p. 27). Despite the economic sanctions and the USA pressure, Iran has afforded to build a small scale of hard power capability to exploit her proximity to the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. To enhance its military capability Tehran depends on foreign arms collection which reflects on the Iranian economy (Connell, 2010; Eisenstadt, 2015, p. 45). To deal with the perceived threat of invasion Iran created the Basij Militia of 20 million-men army to control the internal security and navel guerrilla warfare in the Gulf. They employ swarm tactics, mines, and anti-ship missiles, midget, small boats, combat swimmers and conventional submarines to interrupt shipping in the Gulf and control the sea lane through the Strait of Hormuz (Haghshenass, 1996, pp. 48-62; Ranter, August 6. 2018, pp. 4-5).

Iranian missiles and rockets are more correctly seen as conventional warfighting and deterrence that have the capability of delivering the non-conventional payload. Iran has produced a large Shihab family of conventional missiles and rockets with a range capability of up to 300KM which target the enemy cities in Iraq and on the shore of the Persian Gulf. This capability of missiles and rockets was to ensure the dramatic psychology of opponents and neighboring countries through the neighboring countries, Israel and the USA forces in Arab can counter and shoot down these missiles and rockets. The following table provides the details of Iranian hard power collections.

¹ Mosaic Doctrine is Iranian military doctrine developed during the 1980s in response to the perceived threat of United States and Israeli strikes.

Iran's Hard Power Collection

Missiles and Capacity	Air Power	Navy Force
Shahab 3 (Meteor) 600 miles range missiles	Fighter / Interceptor: 137	Kilo class submarines: 3
Shahab 3 variants 1000-1200 miles range	Fixed-wing attack aircraft: 119	Ghadir class submarines: 120-150
BM-25 Musudan Variant Up to 2500 miles	Transport aircraft: 196	Coastal defense craft: 146
Short range ballistic missile 400 miles range	Trainer aircraft 78	Amphibious ship: 13 Logistic ship: 26
ICBMs 2900 miles range	Helicopters: 123	Torpedoes: 2 with guns range of 76mm
Space Vehicle Low-earth satellite on a safir-2 rocket Range 155 miles	Attack helicopters: 12	Rocket Launcher: 3
Warheads Working to adapt Shahab 3	Radars range 500km Coastal radar range 300km Ship-borne radars 60km	Modern Russian Mines: 1000 Mines warfare 5

Sources: IISS Military Balance 2018 (<https://www.iiss.org/publication/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2018>, Assessed on Dec. 25, 2019)

The estimated military personnel is 5, 23,000 including 3, 50,000 spare force, whereas the estimated paramilitary force is 10, 00,000. Moreover, Iran has 1693 tanks and 8196 heavy guns, including rocket launchers (Albadawi, 2016, p. 177). Iran wants to build its security architecture in this way. It promises to defense capacity and deterrence to exploit the situation in her favor. On the other hand, its neighboring states have spent billions of dollars on purchasing arms (Gardner, November 07, 2019).

Soft Power Strategy

Soft power is used as a new form of using power to achieve foreign policy objectives. Iran utilizes its soft power resources, particularly political influence, economics, religion, and informal activities of propaganda and psychological warfare that are posing a long-term threat to the sovereignty and independence of the neighboring states. Iran with the help of soft power and people from inside and outside has created protection for her against the hard and soft power that was imposed at the time of the revolution. The Iranian ideology of Imam Khomeini during and after the revolution era was widely spread which has great influence on the Islamic world. Iran under her ideology and strategy tried to dominate Shiite communities around the world by spending money to support the activities of clerics

trained in Qum (Khalaji, 2010, pp. 6-11). It also seeks to make a pledge and harmony among Shiite communities all around the world that may serve as support for its policies as allies (Slackman, June 8, 2006). Iran is using media as a vital tool of worldwide communication in the contemporary era of Muslim awakening to get support from Shiite movements with the cultural backdrop of the Islamic revolution. Many television channels, radio, newspapers, magazines and websites in Persian, English and Arabic language has been launched by Iran to convey her message to audiences near and far. Iran's broadcast and telecast Arabic news and program reflect on propaganda lines. The Islamic Republic of Iran has launched some educational activities and programs through these channels as well as scholarships for foreign students in her universities. Tehran has also established academic cooperation with regional states under the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology.

Iran has created proxies groups such as Hezbollah, Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Al Haq and Promised Day Brigade to defend Shiite interests in the world. It utilizes these surrogate groups to project influence abroad like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shiite in Iraq (Eisenstadt, 2015, p. 15). Hezbollah and Hamas pioneered the use strategic system of bombardment against Israel while some groups of Shiite in Iraq use Explosively Formed Penetrators EFPs and rockets against the USA's forces there. Iran also pursues trade and investment with other countries to seek profit to cultivate the need that it can exploit. Despite these emphases, the soft power of Iran is still underperforming and is not considered so, as its form of governance is a viable model. The future of Iranian soft power is depending upon Iran-Iraq relations, Iran-Arab relations in the Gulf and the future status of the nuclear program (Pollack, 2004, pp. 273-75-82). The privileged geographical location of Iran has been affecting the formation of her foreign policy and attraction for near and far nation during the history. In past, there lived together many tribes and groups with peace and tranquility. Nowadays it hosts many immigrants and refugees from neighboring states.

Implications on Geopolitics of the Persian Gulf

Modern Iran has sought the dominant role in the region because of its demography, economic weight as well as value of the Persian Gulf's oil shipping route. Iran was a major power in the region and guarantor of United States interests in the 1960s and 1970s but the Iranian revolution in 1979 considerably changed Tehran's regional stance by overthrowing the pro-American monarchy in the Gulf (Wright R. B., 2010, p. 159). It also changed the Gulf geopolitics of the Persian Gulf when Kuwait and Saudi Arabia guaranteed Iraq's war efforts to the tune of an estimated \$40 billion (Habeeb, 2012, p. 123). The United Arab Emirates federation was split and Dubai, Sharjah and Ume al Quwain remained neutral during the Iran-Iraq war (Ashton & Gibson, 2013, p. 116). Dubai supported Iran and Abu Dhabi supported Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. After 1984, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia pulled into war when Iraq struck the Iranian oil terminal and Iran responded by striking the oil tanks of Iraq's allied Gulf Nations. Even the situation was aggravated when Iran hit the US-flagged ship and the US in reaction attacked the Iranian oil platform in 1987. The Iranian passenger plane was accidentally shot down and 290 crew and passengers were killed. Finally, the war ended when the United Nations passed Resolution no. 598 in 1988 and Iranian accepted the terms. There was no clear victor except a triangular balance of power enacted among the Persian Gulf big troika Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran (Jalalzai, 2007, pp. 64-67; Wright, 2010, p. 160).

At the end of the war in 1988 and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, Iran rose as a pragmatic country (Zaheer & Roofi, 2016, p. 437) trying to ease any tension it had with Persian Gulf countries. The two subsequent Gulf Wars in 1999 and 2003 strengthened it as a regional power. Historically, Iran's trade relations with small Arab states of the region were not bad and Dubai emerged as a vital trade partner of Iran and an occasional outlet to skirt sanctions (Cordesman, US and Iranian Strategic Competition, 2013, pp. 2-3). Bahrain and Kuwait are generally with Saudi Arabia on the matter of Iran however, Qatar has achieved some tactical successes but not strategic goals with its relationship to Iran. Oman has maintained a cordial association with Iran but stands apart from her neighbors and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Masqat has facilitated Iran and United States to start a dialogue for stability and security of the region (Molavi, 2015, p. 2). Since Rafsanjani, there was a shift from a revolutionary to a seemingly pragmatic approach in Iranian foreign policy. Iran and Saudi Arabia could see positive relation thereafter while Iraq seethed at the sight of regional small states and made a peace gesture to Iran at the accumulated war debt (Copley, 1989, p. 12) (Looney, 2014, p. 76). Iraq is unable to make good relations because it attacked Kuwait in August 1990. Washington organized an international community, liberated Kuwait, and protected Saudi Allies but Iran kept herself away from the war despite her tension with the United States. In 1993, Washington adopted the policy of dual containment and targeted both Iraq and Iran (Miles, 2013, p. 68). During Rafsanjani's regime, the Iranian policy altered and Tehran gained the trust of the GCC. Direct flights started landing, trade with GCC increased and money began flowing freely which was the soft landing from the negative impacts of war and revolution in the Rafsanjani Era.

In 1997 Iranian President Muhammad Khatami launched the dialogue of civilization and hosted the OIC summit. Then the de-facto head of state king Abdullah and other senior Saudi dignities visited Iran. The Iran-Saudi detente was accelerating. The incident of 9/11 changed the dynamics of the Iran-United States' relationship. In the next two years, Washington launched wars on Iran's border with Afghanistan and Iraq. Post Saddam Husain's regime, the regional balance of power dramatically tilted in the favor of Iran. Over the next two years, the ministry of intelligence and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps began a sophisticated campaign both on soft and hard powers. The growing role of Iran worried the GCC states (Kamrava, 2011, p. 230). Saud Al-Faisal the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia provided the shreds of evidence of Iranian satellite activities increasing Iranian influence in Iraq in the Council on Foreign Relations in New York in 2005. He also argued that "the Iranians go in this pacified area that America has pacified they go to pay money to every Iraqi government, install their people even establish policy forces for them. And they are being protected in doing this by the British and American forces in the area. To us, it seems out of this world that you do this. We fought a war together to keep Iran away from occupying Iraq after Iraq was driven out from Kuwait. Now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason". (Joshi, 2015, p. 20; Barkey, Lesensky, & Marr, 2011, p. 106). The rise of oil prices in the international market gave the weightage to the Iranian economy and it looked for new business and investment opportunities and turned to Dubai which has emerged as an offshore business center for Iran. By the end of Muhammad Khatamie's regime in 2005 GCC countries were again cautious by Tehran (Dukata, 2007, p. 25). Iraq was being molded more by Iran than any other country in the region. The

regional sunny states as far as Jordan and Egypt were worried about the Shiite crescent taking hold of the region.

The election of 2005 again changed the dynamics of Iranian foreign policy and uranium enrichment resumption was announced and made the focal point of its foreign policy and strategy. The regional states were alarmed as well as Israel and United States. Iran and Saudi Arabia both found struggling for economic and political influence in the region and directly and indirectly supported proxies in regional states like Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iraq (Schefran, Brzoska, Bruach, Link, & Schilling, 2012, p. 416). A microcosm competition was played in the United Arab Emirates where GCC partner oil less Dubai is a rising commercial center and home of the Iranian businessmen community. On the other hand, Tehran's rival Oil-rich and politically powerful capital Abu-Dhabi was allied with Washington. Dubai got economic aid from Abu-Dhabi when the real estate market crashed and companies defaulted of billion dollars in 2009 tipped the balance in the favor of Abu-Dhabi (Wearden, December 14, 2009; Reuters, February 5, 2019).

In June 2013 Hassan Rohani won the Iranian presidential election with the mandate of economic improvement and unlocking the nuclear program for the removal of sanctions and incorporating Iran into the international community and global economy (Bozorgmehr & Martinez, 2013). On July 2015, the Iranian negotiation team completed the nuclear program deal with the major six powers of the world. The efforts of the new Iranian president reintegrated Iran into the international community and also got it free of its pariah status of regional disintegration and geopolitical illness posing challenges to Iran. The civil war in Syria has developed into a dangerous level. The Iranian government supported Assad's government with weapons and money because of closer coordination with Lebanon Hezbollah which fought on the behalf of Assad (Simon, 1976, p. 336). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar's partnership supported the Syrian Opposition and launched a proxy battle against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Then the rise of the Sunny crescent in Iraq posed challenges to Tehran at two levels. First, the Sunny groups threatened Iran's allied regime in Baghdad and second, the toxic ideology made worse the anti-Shiite views infecting the Sunny community across the world (Fisher, January 4, 2016). In late 2015, Riyadh began a bombing campaign in Yemen and accused Iran of supporting Houthi rebels who took a large part of the country. No doubt Iran influences Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shiite population, but its Houthi alliance is shallower. Still, Sunni states and GCC see a war in the region as the term of Saudi-Iran proxy war. The quell concern about the nuclear deal with Iran the GCC countries asked United States to ironclad commitment to their security (Copley, 1989, p. 50). Although Iran has a biggest ground force than other small states in the Persian Gulf, it does face the challenge of a US presence and its support to GCC in the Gulf region. Iran can't pose much conventional threat to the Persian Gulf States as long as the United States maintains a strong military presence and expands defense relations with GCC states.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic Iran's policy towards Persian Gulf states has shifted from idealism to pragmatism and is based on the geopolitics of the region (Zaheer & Roofi, 2016, p. 442). Iran and its Arab neighbors in the

Persian Gulf have been living in turbulent since the Islamic revolution in 1979. However, Iran has tried to build its hard and soft power but at the same time, it looked for reconciliation with the regional states. After wars, Iran has realized that it cannot afford antagonist behavior with its neighbors. During the Iraq-Kuwait war, Iran remained neutral. Resultantly, Oman and Qatar started considering a collective security arrangement including her in the arrangement. Iran also advocated this policy strongly and concentrated on trade to build confidence and security cooperation in the future. However, the fact cannot be denied that Arab States of the Gulf region under the influence of Arab nationalism have a lack of trust in Iran. It can be said that the tentative rapprochement seems to be taking speed but the main obstacle is distrust, which is difficult to overcome, and more serious efforts may be still required.

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