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Iran, the US, and the Persian Gulf

Despite current tensions, cooperation between Tehran and Washington is possible.

By Sina Azodi
November 05, 2016

Iran has one of the longest and subtlest traditions of statehood in the Middle East. Its vast territory once encompassed the modern Caucasus, India, and even modern Egypt. Because of its location between the spheres of influence of constantly changing superpowers and possession of natural resources, Iran has constantly suffered from foreign intervention in its political and security affairs. As a result, Iran finds itself insecure, xenophobic, and the victim of foreign powers' manipulations. On the other hand, Iran by the virtue of its size, population, natural resources, and geography strives to assert its powers in the Persian Gulf. These conflicting factors shaped the foreign policies of the late Shah of Iran, and continue to influence those of the Islamic Republic. However, while the Shah sought to revive the "Persian Empire" by a strategic alliance with the United States, the Islamic Republic has charted an independent course, often undermining American interests in the Persian Gulf. The security of this body of water is pivotal to Iran's security, stability, and long-term economic growth. However, despite significant differences, a tolerable coexistence between the Islamic Republic and the United States is viable.

The Persian Gulf plays a vital role in Iran's security calculations. Its strategic significance to Iran dates back to the first interactions between Iranians and the European powers through commerce between British ships and Persians in Iranian ports. That strategic significance has persisted to modern times. Iran has learned from its bloody experience in the war with Iraq that if a future

conflict occurs, the Sunni Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, fearing Iran's hegemonic power, will most likely support Iran's adversaries. Therefore, in Tehran's security calculations, controlling the waterway is existential to Iran's security. Iran in the past few years has focused its attention on developing its traditionally small naval forces, focusing its attention on defending its offshore facilities and combating piracy.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the Persian Gulf is the only buffer zone that separates the Iranian mainland from its southern neighbors, who are ethnically and religiously at odds with Shiia Persians. Furthermore, this waterway serves Iran as a political tool to bargain with major powers, especially the United States. As the tensions grew over Iran's nuclear program, Iranians repeatedly warned that they would shut down the Strait of Hormuz if they were not allowed to export their oil. While Iran has never attempted to close the strait, it is possible that under a major security threat, such as a total war or a naval blockade, Iran would attempt to shock the international oil markets by disrupting the shipment of oil from the region. This would have been the case in 2008, the U.S. House of Representatives unsuccessfully attempted to pass a resolution that, in practice, would have put Iran under a naval blockade. Under such a scenario, Iran, facing an immediate threat, could attempt to shock global energy markets by closing the Strait of Hormuz and attacking Saudi oil installations. While it is unlikely that Iran could sustain such an operation for a long period of time, the initial shock would have definitely destabilized energy markets, potentially hurting the U.S. economy.

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Given the strategic importance of the strait to Iran, Tehran is wary of any foreign military presence in the body of water. Ever since the arrival of foreign military forces in the Persian Gulf in the 16th century, Iranians have been suspicious of their intentions, and have used various means to push for their departure. The Islamic Republic particularly views the presence of the U.S. military in the Persian Gulf as a threat, and has repeatedly called for the departure of American forces. Mindful of the potential consequences of a confrontation, Iran, has refrained from directly engaging the U.S. Navy in the Persian Gulf. However, it has repeatedly tried to demonstrate its strong presence, by closely monitoring, and in some cases harassing, U.S. Navy vessels. Iran also uses frequent naval wargames to showcase its accomplishments in manufacturing weapons and to maintain the readiness of its troops.

There are a few factors that explain Iran's behavior. For one, Iranians are annoyed by the presence of American forces in their backyard, and view this not only as a security threat, but also as a deterrent force against their regional goals. Second, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN), which is in charge of providing the security of Persian Gulf, mainly consists of hardliners who oppose any rapprochement between Iran and the United States, viewing any easing of hostilities as a threat to the revolution and its own business activities. In fact, reports indicate that the number of dangerous incidents between American and Iranian naval forces (IRGC) in the Persian Gulf have increased by 50 percent since last year, when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed.

In a recently published article, I argued that the current administration in Tehran does not seek confrontation with Washington; however, hardliners wish to undermine the administration by

escalating the tensions between Iran and the United States. The short detention of U.S. sailors who inadvertently had veered into Iran's territorial waters is an example of such incidents. The situation was only resolved after Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif personally intervened to secure the release of the American servicemen. This incident could also be interpreted as Iran's way of demonstrating to Saudi Arabia and the rest of the region that Iran is a powerful force to be reckoned with.

Another important issue to consider is the significance of this body of water to the "Persian" identity. The "Persian" character of this body of water symbolizes Iran's historical influence and power in the region, and its ambitions to be recognized as the region's superpower. In other words, to the Iranian mindset, the Persian Gulf is not just a body of water, but an important reminder of a once-vast empire and its living memory. It is interesting to note that while the Islamic Republic has always emphasized the Islamic narrative of Iranian culture, on this particular issue, it promotes and enforces the "Persian-ness" of this waterway. In 2004, after *National Geographic* used an alternative name (the Arabian Gulf) in reference to the Persian Gulf, in an unprecedented occasion, the government of Iran and Iranian expatriates alike protested, forcing the institution to publish an explanatory statement.

With an ever increasing demand in the energy sector, securing the energy supply lines will be essential for meeting Iran's domestic consumption and export obligations. Here too the Persian Gulf is central to Iranian interests. Iran has the second largest natural gas reserves after Russia, and is known to hold 17 percent of the world's natural gas reserves. Among Iran's gas fields, South Pars is strategically important, as it is shared between Iran and Qatar and constitutes over 40 percent of Iran's proved gas reserves. While Qatar has been successful in developing the field, Iran, as the result of a lack of foreign investment and international sanctions, has yet to fully develop this gas field. Development of Iran's natural gas fields in the Persian Gulf, especially at South Pars, is critical to Iran's economy and infrastructure, because natural gas is the primary fuel source to generate electricity. Iran's oil minister, Bijan Zangeneh, recently announced that in 2013, lack of adequate natural gas production forced the government to feed 46 percent of Iran's power plants with liquid fuels. An increase in the production of natural gas will allow Iran not only to meet its high domestic demand, but to increase its exports to regional countries and Europe, bringing more wealth and stature to the country.

In addition to natural gas, Iran's economic growth is heavily dependent on its oil exports. The Persian Gulf not only serves as the main exporting route for Iran's crude oil, but some of Iran's most strategic oil installations are located there. Kharg Island is home to Iran's largest oil export terminal, with the capacity to store 28 million barrels of oil.

The experience of Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) has also encouraged Iran to focus its attention on securing the shipping routes in the Persian Gulf. During the so called "Tanker War," Iranian and international tankers that carried petroleum to the energy markets were constantly attacked, resulting in fuel rations and economic hardships in Iran. The conflict in effect forced the United States, Soviet Union, and other major powers to intervene to ensure the free flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz.

Ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, U.S.-Iranian relations have been locked in a geopolitical competition over power and influence in the Persian Gulf, effectively creating a zero-sum atmosphere. While some in both Tehran and Washington insist that a conflict between the United States and Iran is inevitable, I believe a tolerable coexistence, which guarantees the interests of both sides in the Persian Gulf is not out of reach. Iran and the United States are both interested in upholding the Persian Gulf's maritime security, combating extremist groups, and ensuring the free flow of oil and energy; these areas of mutual interest can be the groundwork for coexistence. Iran strongly believes that the Persian Gulf is its own backyard, and that it should be given freedom of action to play its "natural" role as the hegemon. While this is not currently acceptable to any U.S. administration, Iran's legitimate security concerns should not be dismissed. Iran too, should recognize the U.S. commitment to protect its interests and those of its allies, and refrain from actions that could antagonize the United States.