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Ambesh Kumar Pandey
PhD. Political Geography
Division, CIPOD, School of
International Studies, Jawahar
Lal Nehru University,
New Delhi, India

The United States of America's Geopolitics around Arabian Sea

Ambesh Kumar Pandey

Abstract

Primary and Secondary economic activities dominate in United State of America (USA) and for that it required oil, consequently it intervened the Middle East. The article interprets US geopolitics around Arabian Sea, the opening route from West-Asia. The Arabian Sea is highly militarized due to presence of various security forces but due to prominent sea lanes none of the state wants to lose its position. Along with oil politics US Navies fighting against piracy and maritime terrorism, which is very harmful for world economy. USA is time to time facing strong opposition from various extremist Islamist organisations despite it want its presence around Arabian Sea.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, Unites States of America

Introduction

The United States was not much concerned about the region before the cold war, as in 1973 it refused to develop Gwadar as a port but later it came to know the preciousness of the place in the Arabian Sea. To keep a continuous watch on the activities going in the sea it took Diego-Garcia on lease from where it overviews the activities of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. The significant battle grounds up to the cold war were Europe (Berlin), Asia (Korea and Vietnam), and even Latin America (Cuba), but Middle East emerged as a region of special concern toward the end of the twentieth century for the US and its navy (Symonds, 2005) [13]. After that its active role in the region have give a new dimension to the Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean and it has turned into a zone of excessive militarization. Many states including China, Russia, India, Japan and European Union perceives their interest in Arabian waters. The conflict of regional and extra-regional powers is clearly visible after observing the events and military deployment here. The discovery of oil has brought USA in the regional politics of West-Asia and impact of that is seen through its maritime efforts in Arabian waters.

The book written by Craig L. Simonds named as "Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles that Shaped American History" writes after cold war the US Navy made its public debut in the Persian Gulf named on the older name of Iran. The Persian Gulf that touches the shores of almost eight states: Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The most noticeable point is that the coastal provinces possess 80 percent of the world's proven oil reserves that has made it one of the busiest waterways in the world by the 1980s. It further writes about the dozen of tankers with millions of barrels of oil passing every day from the gulf into the Arabian Sea through the narrow Hormuz Strait, heading for America, Europe and especially Japan, which in the 1980s obtained nearly two-thirds of its oil from the Persian Gulf. US Navy fought Operation Praying Mantis on April 18, 1988, in the last days of Cold War, being one of the largest naval battles since World War II.

USA's intervention in the Arabian Sea Region and Oil Politics

Many academicians claim that apparently the USA tried to act as a world policeman when it fought the battle. But it was required for American interest being one of the larger importers of oil from that area. Academicians write Operation Praying Mantis was an attack of US Navy inside the Iran's territorial waters because it was mining the Persian Gulf. At that period, Iran and Iraq war was continue and many claimed damage of an American warship. It can be seen that from 1988, USA started intervening in the Arabian Sea and Gulf waters

Correspondence

Ambesh Kumar Pandey
PhD. Political Geography
Division, CIPOD, School of
International Studies, Jawahar
Lal Nehru University,
New Delhi, India

frequently. Though, USA was very vigilant over the land geopolitics from the time of Yom Kippur war in 1973 that was fought against Israel by the combined forces of Egypt and Syria. It was a coordinated attack by Arabian states on the holiest day according to the Jewish calendar. The superpowers intervened into the matter to defend the benefit of their clients in the Middle East: America was like a helping hand to Israel but the Soviet Union backed Egypt and Syria. The existence of Israel was possible because of the USA and the strengthened the US- Israeli coalition (Elizabeth Stephens, 2008). The 1973 war in West Asia, the initial setback to Israeli forces and defiance of Arab countries by imposing an embargo on oil deliveries to the US marked the first major shift in American Strategy in the Western Indian Ocean Region (Namboodiri 1982: 141) ^[9].

Burns in a chapter entitled "Naval Power in the Indian Ocean: Evolving Roles, Missions and Capabilities" of the book "Indian Ocean Rising: Maritime Security and Policy Challenges" writes during cold war strategic ocean theatres centred largely on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. During this time, the Indian Ocean was not considered a major theatre for potential super-power confrontations. The primary US objective was to ensure sufficient force deployment to deter any potential Soviet moves against critical oil supplies. Nevertheless, Indian Ocean remained vital for secure exports for crude oil from the Persian Gulf producers (as it does today), and parts of the ocean's northern reaches were the setting for a major inter-state war between Iran and Iraq during the 1980s (Burns 2012: 41) ^[3]. Now a day's, US has perceived the ongoing changes in the Indian Ocean Region and Gulf region. It seems Burns provide four basic reasons of increased strategic value of IOR for the world which are, the astonishing economic growth of China, the steady rise of India's trade and productivity, increasing exports of raw materials from developing countries and rising exports of crude oil from the Middle East to Asia.

The USA perceives any interruption in the oil supply because of the blockade of Strait of Hormuz, Bab- al-Mandeb or Suez Canal can enhance the oil prices or instability because of war or terrorism can hamper oil markets and affect the economic condition. There has been a history of oil price rise, energy crisis and inflation. The first energy crisis happened in the 1970s, especially in 1973 and 1979. The 1973 oil crisis started during October of the year when OAPC (Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries) countries announced an oil embargo. The OAPC countries included all the members of OPEC now along with Egypt and Syria. That time, oil prices rose from 3\$ to 12\$ globally. Similarly in 1979 during Iranian Revolution crude oil price take a hike due to degraded oil output, the price of crude oil reached \$39.50 per barrel which was more than double of the earlier price of oil. That oil shock affected US economy sufficiently, a condition of the recession was faced all over the world including the US. After that oil crisis, the USA is very conscious about SLOCs security, its bilateral relations with trade partners and areas nearby to ensure proper energy supply. In 1990s oil shock happened again because of the gulf war, Iraq invaded Kuwait alleging Kuwait was overproducing the oil (more than OPEC quotas). A Coalition's military was formed in Saudi Arabia led by US, Saudi Arabia, UK and Egypt against Iraq to combat the problem. Finally, Iraq withdrew

its forces from the Kuwait after the Operation Desert Storm was over.

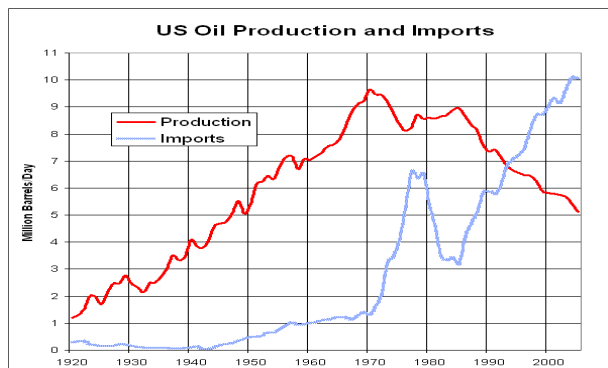
The noticeable thing is, the USA had always been involved in the Gulf conflict after the discovery of oil, as it knows well that the Arabian Sea is the only maritime way out of Gulf region, so it can't be neglected. Keeping an eye over the SLOCs linked to the Arabian Sea, American interest can be fulfilled best but its involvement here is very risky as was seen during 9/11. Because of its high level of involvement here, it perceives a relatively wide range of potential threats in the region that could harm its interest. The natures and reasons of threats are diverse like threats from state actors like Iran and China and some threatening non- state actors such as militant groups. Security concerns are unavoidable, ranging from sea lanes (all the SLOCs) protection to nuclear proliferation to failed state. Islamic terrorism is also of major concern, but it's not as it was before (Brewster, 2012) ^[2]. The emergence of fundamentalist Islamism groups like ISIS and Al-Shabab are continuous threats to Western countries. In October 2007, it implied that it was seeking a sustained forward presence in the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific but no longer in Atlantic-a momentous shift in overall US maritime strategy. The document "Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025" also concluded that the Indian Ocean and its adjacent waters will be a central theatre of global conflict and competition this century.

Iranian Vice-President Mohammad Raja Rahimi on December 28, 2011 threatened world community to close the Hormuz strait if Western powers imposed further sanctions against Iran- specially those targeting its oil exports (BBC News). The same news article of December 28, 2011 writes about US continuous naval presence in the Gulf, its presence is attributed to ensure the transport of oil remain open. Though Iran needs the strait open more than any other Gulf exporter, as it has no alternate route for crude oil export and needs to import high volumes of refined products such as gasoline, diesel and Jet-A due to its declining domestic refining capacity (Burns 2012:42) ^[3]. Herbart Burns writes Tehran threatened on January 3, 2012, to take unspecified action if the US Navy sent the strike carrier USS John C. Stennis – or any other carrier-back into the Persian Gulf. The USS John C. Stennis had previously transited through the Hormuz Strait on December 27, 2011, to take up position in the Arabian Sea to provide air support for the war in Afghanistan (Hafezi, 2012) ^[5]. The way events are happening these days are making the situation unpredictable but whatever happens, happens for a cause. The demands of crude oil and natural gas had been motivating factor whenever the situation ignited. US have always been one of the largest consumers of the energy resources because of its industrialized economy where secondary and tertiary economic activities dominate. The whole scene started changing after 1950 when shift in the US energy demands happened at a greater rate and it compromised nothing at the cost of development.

We can see here in the graph that US demand for oil started increasing sharply after 1970, that time due to high productivity it fulfilled its internal demands. During last 70s its demand reached 6 to 7 million barrels per day, production was around 8 to 10 million barrels per day but slowly after that production started declining. Demand was further high and it continued after the 1990s, slightly reached to peak. To fulfil internal demands United States always required a source and it ensured continuous supply

of oil from Gulf. The gross crude oil import by US from Gulf of Persia during 2002 was around 2.3 million bbl/d, that came from Saudi Arabia (69 percent), Iraq (20 percent), Kuwait (10 percent), Qatar and UAE (lesser than 1). The data reveals that overall Persian Gulf accounted for about 22 percent of US net oil imports, and 11 percent of US oil demand (data based on fact sheet, US Department of Energy).

Fig 1: United States oil Production and Imports



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1973_oil_crisis#/media/File:US_Oil_Production_and_Imports_1920_to_2005.png (Accessed on May 14, 2016)

The US Naval Presence in Arabian Sea

The branch of US Navy which is responsible for naval forces in the Arabian Sea including Persian Gulf, Red Sea and other parts of the Indian Ocean is Fifth Fleet, which is active since 1994. It is a part of US Central Command (CENTCOM). Fifth Fleet keeps its eye on maritime activities through five naval task forces namely-Combined Task Force (CTF) 158, Combined Task Force 150, Combined Task Force 151, Combined Task Force 152 and Combined Task Force 52. The various task forces oversee its given area and serve the purpose for which they are formed. The CTF 158 which operates in the northern area of Persian Gulf protects Iraqi oil terminals of ABOT and KAAOT, now CTF IM. The CTF 150 patrols across Horn of Africa covering half of Arabian Sea, also oversees Hormuz, Gulf of Aden and Bab- al -Mandeb. Similarly, CTF 152 works in between the area of CTF 158 and CTF150 near the Persian Gulf. The Somalian pirates are being tackled by the CTF 151 which covers almost same area as CTF 150. It protects commercial shipping boats and leisure boats from pirate attacks. The countermining and demining activity is being watched by the CTF 52 patrolling the same area as 152. So, US naval strategy is very effective in the Arabian Sea and nearby SLOCs. Apart from USA and Gulf States, Chinese and Indian Naval forces are also present with force. Chinese People Liberation Army Navy (PLA) is protecting China Interest away from Chinese territorial waters, and for Gwadar it always focuses this region as area of vital interest. China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) reduces the cost of Chinese imports and of much profit for China.

Conclusion

Arabian Sea is the route that ensures supply from Gulf countries, and to gulf countries therefore, Arabian Sea is always a "region of need" for USA government. Doesn't matter who claims what, alleges whatever, USA never want to take a back-stand from the Gulf region. Despite strong

resistance from terrorist forces USA Navy is combating forcefully. USA thinks for future and Arabian Sea is route to energy supplies therefore it's very concerned and combined task forces are combating piracy and terrorism. It's diplomatically handling the situation and trying to have better relation with India which has longer maritime boundary. Finally Arabian Sea is very strategic in nature and littoral states should take it as an opportunity and utilise it as an area of growth.

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