

GCC-Iran Rivalry and Strategic Challenges for India in the Gulf

Prasanta Kumar Pradhan

The relations between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which are marked by competition and rivalry, have posed challenges for Indian foreign policy in recent times. The two sides have engaged in ideological conflicts over the Shia-Sunni divide, territorial disputes, presence of the USA in the region, Iranian nuclear programme and Saudi-Iranian relations. Till the end of the Cold War, India's relationship with the Gulf region was dominated by trade and commerce. In the early 1990s, with changes in the global political scenario, India improved its engagement with the Gulf region. India also initiated engagement with Iran and, within a decade, the two countries were able to build up a firm relationship. But the next decade witnessed a number of developments such as India's stand on Iran's controversial nuclear programme, increasing isolation of Iran by the West, failure of the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline to reach India, etc., which negatively impacted on the otherwise growing India-Iran relationship. At the same time, India also strengthened ties with the GCC countries in trade and business, in the interest of ensuring the welfare of the five million-strong Indian diaspora, strengthening the fight against terrorism and piracy, and to protect the sea lines of communication. This engagement has largely been successful. Recent high-level visits exchanged between India and the GCC countries are an indicator of the growing relationship.

But India also faces a number of strategic challenges in the region. India's relationship with Iran raises suspicions in GCC countries; and India's relationship with the GCC countries, who are close allies of the USA, creates doubts in Iran. There is a dominant perception in Iran that India has thoroughly allied itself with the USA in the Gulf. China, meanwhile, is strengthening its foothold and expanding to new frontiers of engagement in the region. China's

rising profile in the region is a concern for India. Another major concern is the role of regional powers in war-torn Iraq. All these dynamics put into question India's energy security, since India imports two-thirds of its energy requirements from the Gulf region.

GCC-Iran Conflict

There are several dimensions of the conflict between the GCC and Iran.

Ideological Rivalry

After the Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini openly declared his intention to export his brand of Islam and support the Shias in other countries of the region in order to overthrow the neighbouring Sunni regimes. He said:

Our revolution is not limited to the boundaries of Iran. Economic and political difficulties should not compel our officials to forgo the principal task of exporting our lofty Islamic Revolutionary goals.... The true meaning of export of our revolution is to awaken the Muslims and their governments so that they can change themselves and not allow their precious resources to be plundered by anti-Muslim outsiders.¹

This posed a challenge, both in terms of ideology and national interest, to the Arab Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, whose claim to be leader of the Muslim world as well as to remain the regional superpower was challenged by the new Iranian regime. It also increased the vulnerabilities of other smaller Gulf Sheikdoms who also use Islam to legitimize their rule and have a good number of Shia population within their territory. Iran has been encouraging the Shias of GCC countries to revolt against their regimes. There are allegations that it is doing the same in Iraq and Yemen also. Any sign of a Shia revival threatens to expose the erosion of legitimacy and the increasing gap between the Sunni rulers and their people. The ageing Arab Sunni rulers, especially the Saudis, recognize the ability of the younger Shia leaders like Ahmadinejad who can mobilize the Arab street irrespective of sect.²

Iranian Nuclear Programme

Officially, the GCC recognizes Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear programme. But its attitude changed in 2002-3, when evidence emerged about a clandestine Iranian nuclear weapon programme. Apprehension developed particularly regarding the reported uranium enrichment capability and Iran attempting to make nuclear bombs to assert its own political and military superiority over

the Gulf countries. The GCC countries supported IAEA efforts and welcomed the involvement of the UN Security Council to prevent Iran from developing nuclear military capability. They support diplomatic and economic measures to pressurize Iran but not the employment of the military option.³ A nuclear-armed Iran would multiply the threat perceptions of the GCC countries. The Gulf Arab countries view Iran as a hegemonic power, eager to spread its own influence in the region. They are also concerned about the possible environmental hazards associated with the nuclear programme, particularly in case of a natural disaster. The concern is particularly acute about the Bushehr nuclear plant which is located along the Iranian coast.

Territorial Disputes

Iran is in occupation of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb islands in the Gulf, which are claimed by the UAE. Iran claims that Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and the northern part of Abu Musa were handed over to it by the British acting on behalf of Sharjah and Ras al Khayma.⁴ The GCC supports the UAE's claim. The Final Communiqué of the 29th Session of the Supreme Council of the GCC, held in Muscat in December 2008, says: "It (GCC) supports the right of the United Arab Emirates to regain the islands of Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa, their continental shelves, territorial waters and the exclusive economic zone being an integral part of the UAE." The communiqué also appealed to Iran to resolve the issue through direct negotiations or revert to the International Court of Justice. To add to the GCC's worries, Iran has built up a port on Abu Musa. In August 2008, Iran opened two administrative offices there, which it claims are to help ship registration and maritime rescue. In a statement, GCC Secretary-General Abdurrahman Al-Attiyah "strongly denounced" the move and added that the Iranian measure constituted an "illegitimate action on an indivisible part of the UAE."⁵ The GCC fears that this will give Iran greater control of shipping traffic through the Strait of Hormuz.⁶

Presence of the United States

Iran alleges that the GCC countries have invited the USA to the region and that they are puppets of "the Great Satan". At present, the US military is present to Iran's west in all the GCC countries, Iraq in the north, and Pakistan and Afghanistan in the east. Iran has proposed a regional security order involving all the countries of the region to keep the USA out. Apart from the nuclear programme, Iran's perception of the USA as a possible threat comes

from US allegations of Iran's support to terrorism and its WMD and missile capabilities. The US also has issues with the nature and behaviour of the regime in Tehran. If Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, it would give that country an enormous strategic tool, threaten Israel, and fuel a nuclear arms race in the region while also raising the potential of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorist groups. Iran's influence in the region would also increase immensely, shifting the precarious balance of power.⁷ The GCC countries are under the security umbrella of the USA, which acts as a check on the growing Iranian power and ambitions in the region. The GCC countries are also concerned with Iran behaving as a bullying neighbour and Iran's historical sense of civilizational supremacy.⁸

Saudi-Iranian Relations

Saudi-Iranian relations have witnessed severe bitterness since the Islamic revolution of 1979. The 1979 takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Juhayman al Utaibi, and the charges of Iranian involvement in it and the subsequent demonstration by the Iranian pilgrims during the Hajj pilgrimage, the killing of more than 400 Iranian pilgrims in 1987 by the Saudi security forces during a protest, etc. have further depleted the relationship. During the Iran–Iraq war of 1980–1988, Saudi Arabia supported Iraq against Iran; on the other hand Iran called the Al Saud regime un-Islamic and openly called for its overthrow, and criticized the Saudi regime's relationship with the United States.⁹

Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran have been strained for a number of reasons. Ideological rivalry, Saudi allegation of Iran inciting the Shia population in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, Iranian allegation of Saudi Arabia inciting Iran's Sunni population, regional power struggle between the two, Iranian nuclear programme, close Saudi-US relations, etc. are some of the reasons. Saudi Arabia, having the two holiest sites of Islam, Mecca and Medina on its soil, has been claiming to be the world leader of Muslims. It has also used Islam as a tool of its foreign policy to spread its influence among other Muslim countries. The Saudis have spent millions of dollars all over the Muslim world to spread their own influence as well as the Sunni Wahhabi brand of Islam. Iran has challenged the Saudi leadership of the Muslim world and sought take over that role.¹⁰ Further, the Iranian military development and attempt to control the whole region has increased the race for regional superpower rivalry. During the 1980s, there were protests by the Iranian Hajj pilgrims at Mecca and Medina. Saudi Arabia's support for Iraq in the Iraq–Iran War of 1980–1988

further deteriorated the relationship.¹¹ In recent times, the Iranian nuclear programme has been a major point of suspicion and contention between the two countries. Saudi Arabia has questioned the “peaceful” nature of the programme and has supported the USA in imposing sanctions against Iran.

India’s Interest in GCC and Iran

India has interests with the GCC in economic, political, security and strategic fields. In recent times both sides have been looking for new areas of cooperation and are trying to improve the relationship. Economic relations have been the backbone of India-GCC ties, with trade and business growing steadily. The Gulf supplies around two-thirds of India’s energy requirements. The Gulf region has also been a lucrative market for Indian manufactured goods like textiles, spices, food products, and lately, electrical goods and machineries and IT products. Current bilateral total trade between India and GCC countries is estimated at around (US)\$84 billion.¹² Expatriate workers from India, five million strong, constitute the largest workforce in the GCC countries, which prefer Indian workers as they are generally found to be skilled, efficient, low-waged and law-abiding.¹³ Protecting the interests of the Indian workers has been an important objective of Indian foreign policy in the region.

In order to get closer to the Gulf countries and promote its interests, the Government of India adopted the “Look West” policy in 2005. Their own volatile security situation and precarious strategic environment also convinced the GCC countries to adopt a “Look East” policy to give priority to their Asian neighbours. India figures large in their new-found policy priorities. India is the first developing country and only the fourth country after USA, European Union and Japan to have been granted the status of a “dialogue partner” by the GCC.¹⁴

The steady progress of the Indian economy, stable democratic political structure, technological development and the increasing demands for energy are some of the factors for which India is important for the GCC in its “Look East” policy. With the availability of large-scale skilled and semi-skilled human resources and the policies of the government that are conducive to foreign investment, India has been a major destination for Foreign Direct Investment by the Gulf region.¹⁵ The GCC is also looking towards India as a strategic partner in the years to come as the events of 11 September 2001 have induced a change in the security environment of the Gulf region. Similarly, India looks

at the GCC countries as partners in tackling terrorism and has signed defence cooperation agreements with UAE, Oman and Qatar.

As regards Iran, though India's relationship with that country has gone through many difficult phases, it gathered warmth after a couple of high-level visits exchanged between New Delhi and Tehran. Iran has been defined as India's "proximate neighbourhood". Its geopolitical and strategic location, long coastline along the Gulf, and its influence over the Strait of Hormuz make it an important country in the region. For India, Iran is an important source of energy. Iran has the third-largest proven oil reserves and second-largest proven gas reserves in the world. India's hopes rest on Iranian gas for its long-term energy security.

Cooperation in sectors like investment in upstream and downstream activities in the oil sector, LNG/natural gas tie-ups and secure modes of transport have been mooted by both countries. Investment in sectors like oil and gas, steel, fertilizer, infrastructure and railways is being considered. ONGC Videsh Ltd. (OVL) has discovered significant quantities of gas and oil in Iran in exploratory work done during 2004–2007 at an estimated cost of \$90 million. OVL is also in talks with Iranian companies for development of the Azadegan and South Pars gas fields. India would welcome Iranian investment in India, especially in the oil and gas sectors.¹⁶ India's trade with Iran amounts to \$13.39 billion, with imports of \$11.54 billion and exports of \$1.85 billion in 2009-10. Iran ranks ninth in India's total trade.¹⁷

Good ties with Iran would provide India an access route to Central Asia and both would play an active role in Afghanistan. India, Iran and Afghanistan are discussing to develop the Chahbahar route through Melak, Zaranj and Delaram, which would facilitate regional trade and transit, including to Afghanistan and Central Asia. India has constructed the Zaranj–Delaram road in Afghanistan. As Central Asia is important and India needs a transit route to that region, the route via Iran would be economical and time saving. India is also helping Iran to develop the Chahbahar port, which would give India access to the oil and gas resources in Iran and the Central Asian states. The two countries have signed an agreement to give Indian goods heading for Central Asia and Afghanistan preferential treatment and tariff reductions at Chahbahar.¹⁸ This will help India transport its goods, including humanitarian supplies, to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Another potential area of cooperation between India and Iran is in maritime security. Indian interest in the Indian Ocean region and the proximate

neighbourhood focuses on the need for regional peace and stability, mutually beneficial relations with littoral states, accessibility of oil and gas resources, the freedom of navigation through the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, and access to regional markets for Indian goods, technology, investment, labour and services.¹⁹

India recognizes Iran as a major power in the region. Iran's geographic size, huge population, skilled human resources, oil and gas, Shia majority, etc. make Iran an important player in the region. India has stated that the sanctions against Iran would hurt India as Iran is an important trade partner and a major source of its energy supply.

Challenges for India

Dealing with the USA

With the support of friendly GCC countries and military forces being deployed all over the region, USA remains the dominant player in the Gulf. The security umbrella of the USA to the GCC countries has been a major concern for the Iranians. India has been in a dilemma over the situation. USA expressed concerns over the IPI gas pipeline, suspecting that it would lead to strengthening of Indo-Iranian ties and it would not be in the interest of the USA if the two major powers build strategic ties in the region where the USA has a number of stakes involved. USA wants India to restrict interaction with Tehran and is likely to keep pressurizing India for that. American pressure is often cited by the Iranians as a major reason for the failure of the IPI gas pipeline; and instead USA offered a nuclear deal with India. India has also voted against Iran at the IAEA on all occasions in recent years.

The USA is comfortable with growing Indian ties with the GCC countries, but the long-term implications and sustainability of the present circumstances remain hazy. India realizes the importance of Iran as a big neighbour, a major regional player, important for India's energy security, etc. India is open for a strategic partnership with Tehran if circumstances dictate it in future.

India cannot fully support the US policies in the region, nor can it completely oppose them. India would require the support of the USA in the region to further its own interests.²⁰ There are a number of prospective areas of cooperation between the two countries in the region, such as protection of the sea lanes, maritime policing, counterterrorism, energy security, etc. Strategically, USA would be happy to have India on its side against Iran. But

there remain a number of differences between India and the USA over the war on terror, approach to religious extremism, and the elevation of non-proliferation above all other geopolitical considerations.²¹ India also disapproves of the US invasion of Iraq and that country's current policies and sanctions against Iran. India's interests will continue to be at variance with the USA also because of its long historical and cultural links with the region and because India's security directly depends on developments in the region. India's dilemma would be to strike a balance between its historical interests and growing demands of its relations with the USA.²² It remains a challenge for India to devise a long-term policy so as to balance its own interests in the region, keeping in mind key regional players and the USA.

Growing Chinese Profile in the Gulf

China is comparatively a newcomer to the region unlike India or the USA. Till the 1970s China openly described the Gulf monarchies as puppets of the US and British imperialists.²³ The Gulf rulers were also allergic to the Chinese revolutionary communist ideology. To much of their apprehension, China assisted dissident radicals in some of the Gulf countries. But with the growth of the Chinese economy and its increasing reliance on energy, China has made rapid progress in its involvement with the Gulf countries in recent decades. Now China talks of trade and business with the Gulf countries and has dropped the ideological content. Bilateral trade between China and the GCC reached \$70 billion in 2008. According to McKinsey & Company, this trade has broadened dramatically over the past decade and by 2020 trade flows are expected to climb to \$350–500 billion.²⁴ The first GCC-China Business Forum was held in March 2010 in Manama, Bahrain, with more than 350 high-ranking GCC and Chinese delegates attending. The conclave discussed economic trends and opportunities in China and the GCC and was intended to facilitate contacts between the business leaders of the two sides.²⁵ China has particularly made strides in doing business with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. China's growth in trade and investment in the Gulf at this rate poses a challenge for India's interests in the region.²⁶ In order to boost its trade in the region, China has been engaged in negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) with the GCC since July 2004. Five rounds of negotiations have been held till date. Though the FTA is expected to face American pressure, the growing Chinese profile in the region is a matter of concern for India.

China and GCC held their first "Strategic Dialogue" in Beijing in June 2010 which was, among others, attended by Chinese Foreign Minister Yang

Jiechi and Kuwaiti Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Muhammed Sabah al-Salem al-Sabah, GCC Secretary General Abdul Rahman al-Attiyah, and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of the UAE Anwar Muhammed Qarqash. It was highlighted by both sides that they should undertake mutually beneficial economic, diplomatic and cultural initiatives to strengthen their mutual relations.²⁷

China has also built up a strategic partnership with Iran and has been one of the sources of arms supplies to that country. Despite voting against Iran at the IAEA over the nuclear issue, China has managed to stabilize its relations with Iran. For Iran, strategically, China is the counterweight to the USA in the region. On the other hand China has been viewed by Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries as an important trade partner and a big power in Asia. Saudi Arabia has been trying to embrace the two big Asian powers – India and China – under its own “Look East” policy. Again, the politically neutral and ideologically non-intervening China has been better accepted among the Gulf Arab rulers. Though China is politically non-intervening at present, India needs to be careful about Chinese activities in the region in the future.

Strengthening Ties with Iraq

Iraq is going through an important phase of transition in its history. The USA has announced a gradual withdrawal of its troops from that country. Though the security situation has improved significantly, terrorist incidents still take place intermittently in Iraq.

India responded to the UN Secretary-General’s appeal and committed \$20 million for assistance to the Iraqi people. Activities under this pledge included supply of milk powder through the World Food Programme, training of Iraqi Foreign Service officers in diplomacy, and training of Iraqi officials in information technology. In addition, India contributed \$10 million towards the International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq for investments, reconstruction and development. In terms of capacity building, India is annually providing 120 slots to Iraq under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme to train Iraqi government officials. The Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) has been providing training in India to the Iraqi officials on various subjects related to downstream oil sector.²⁸

Apart from the developmental and rehabilitation programmes, India’s influence in Iraq is negligible. There is a stiff competition between Iran and the GCC countries to consolidate their influences in the country. GCC countries

supported Ayyad Allawi in the March 2010 elections as Allawi's block accommodated Sunnis and other minorities in their camp. On the other hand, Nouri al Maliki's Shiite alliance was backed by Iran.

Since 2003, high-level bilateral visits between India and Iraq have been limited. The Iraqi Minister of Oil, Hussein Al Sharistani, visited India in 2007 and Minister of Industry and Minerals Fauzi Franso Hariri visited in February 2010; while there have been no high-level visits from India. India is trying to regain its influence in Iraq by means of trade and investment, rehabilitation programmes, supporting capacity building and human resource development, etc. in Iraq. But this will take a long time to produce any substantial results. India will also need to look beyond the rehabilitation packages and developmental programmes in Iraq.

Energy Security

India is the fourth-largest oil-consuming country in the world after the United States, China and Japan. Saudi Arabia was the top crude oil supplier to India in 2009-10 (26,882.66 tons), followed by Iran (22,085.77 tons). Other major crude suppliers from the region are Kuwait (14,611.68 tons in 2009-10), Iraq (13,883.04 tons) and UAE (10,433 tons).²⁹ India also imported 8.25 billion cubic metres (bcm) of natural gas from Qatar, 0.35 bcm from Oman and 0.17 bcm from the UAE in 2009.³⁰ India's attempts to build the Strategic Petroleum Reserve would mean further reliance upon the region for energy.

As the issue of energy supplies is directly related to the regional political conditions and the warmth of bilateral relations, it becomes important to take the relationship up to a level of stability. In recent years, India-Iran relations have been stagnating. With the IPI pipeline project stalled, India voting against Iran at the IAEA, India getting closer to the USA and the GCC countries, the situation looks discouraging for strong India-Iran relations. Iran is one of the very few countries which is endowed with large quantities of oil and natural gas. Geographic proximity makes it an attractive energy supplier and economic partner.³¹ Though both countries are engaged well in bilateral trade and investment and some high-level political visits have taken place, that has not translated into a stronger political and strategic relationship. The IPI gas pipeline has not been able to reach India due to several reasons but Iran has stated that India can join the project at anytime it wants.

On the other hand, the GCC countries look content that the IPI pipeline project has stalled. India has been talking to them to increase their crude

supply to India. During his visit to Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh discussed a “strategic energy partnership” between the two countries. India is also talking to Qatar for increasing the supply of natural gas to India. In the current situation, it becomes important for India to calibrate its policies so as to ensure the supply of oil from both GCC countries and Iran. There is a need to strengthen and diversify the energy supply sources.

The Way Ahead

Adopting a balanced approach to secure its interests in the region remains a daunting task for India. India has been trying to engage Iran with relatively low publicity: the time is not ripe for engaging Iran more prominently, as that country is currently entangled over the nuclear issue with the USA and the West.

The conflict between Iran and the GCC countries has severe regional implications for India. Issues like energy security, dealing with the USA in the Gulf, Chinese influence in the region, developments in Iraq, are all pressing issues which demand immediate engagement. The growing Indian interests and influence in the region should be complemented with a sound policy of dealing with the major players, which remains a huge political and diplomatic challenge. Dealing with the USA in the Gulf is a political and strategic challenge while China primarily remains an economic rival. Any conflict in the Gulf region in the past has had a negative impact on the supply and price of oil from the Gulf. Iran has time and again threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz in case of an attack on the country. A peaceful and stable Gulf region is in India’s interest and India needs to carefully nurture its policies in the region.

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