

Iran's Persian Gulf Policy: Localization of Regional Security

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Abstract

The nucleus of Iran's Persian Gulf (PG) policy is to localize regional security, that is, to limit the responsibility of maintaining regional peace and stability exclusively to the littoral states of the PG waterway. Grounded in a historically informed and intersubjectively sustained paradoxical sense of being a major power in the region and a target of foreign interventions, Iran has always called for the formation of a region-based security system where all the littoral states participate in a collective and coordinated manner to ensure regional security. Iran has, however, failed to achieve this objective. This article is aimed at exploring and explaining why Iran calls for the localization of the PG security and why it has failed in making so happen. Drawing on the aspect of "social construction" in Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), this article argues that the impediment to the localization of PG security is primarily cognitive or ideational, that is, negative identification between Iran and the states of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as well as differing perceptions regarding what constitutes threat and security in the region. It suggests that regional security may remain uncertain unless the two sides of the PG change the lenses through which they see each other. This article also discusses intra-GCC rivalries and the presence of American forces in the region as two other significant factors in hampering any tangible progress towards the establishment of an intra-regional collective structure to ensure regional security and stability.

Keywords: Persian Gulf, Regional security, Social Construction, Regional Security Complex Theory, Negative Identification

Introduction

Broadly speaking, Iran's PG policy revolves around the objective of localizing regional security which, from Iran's perspective, is the only way to ensure that the region does not plunge into any crisis and the PG, Strait of Hormuz, and Gulf of Omen remain safe and open for both the littoral states and others. For Iran, only the regional states are responsible as well as capable of maintaining stability in the region. Any foreign interference in regional affairs and the presence of extra-regional forces in the region is, thus, prone to trigger conflicts and is dangerous and counterproductive. The GCC states are, on the other side, tend to get major powers involved in shouldering the responsibility for preventing the region from being wrecked in instability.¹ In other words, the GCC pursues the policy of what can be called as internationalization of regional security.

Iran's call for the establishment of a regional security structure, inclusive of all states bordering the PG, and its emphasis on non-intervention of external powers in regional affairs predates the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In 1972, for example, the Shah—following the new American agreement to keep naval facilities in Bahrain after British withdrawal from the region—said that Iran would not want to see any foreign presence in the PG and that this policy had not changed.² Like the Shah, the Islamic Republic has been a leading exponent of security cooperation between regional states and, to quote former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, “peace and complete security without outside influence.”³ Despite Iran's recurring insistence that the issue of regional security be dealt with internally by the regional states, the GCC states have shown no enthusiasm for the Iranian proposal. Why the GCC states are reluctant to work with Iran for regional peace and security? Why Iran wants to localize regional security? Why Iran has failed in realizing its most important policy objective in the region? This article deals with these questions within the theoretical framework of RSCT, with an emphasis on how mutual perceptions—shaped primarily by ideational factors—influence the way states see each other. It

argues that there is far less likelihood of the formation of any regional security system unless the two sides of the PG radically alter the old intersubjective structures of mutual understanding as the formidable obstacle in this regard is ideational rather than geopolitical.

Theoretical framework

According to RSCT, the PG region is one of the three sub-complexes of the Middle Eastern regional security complex (RSC),⁴ which emerged following the departure of British forces from the region and the end of British protectorate over Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1971.⁵ The RSCT is based on the assumption that security or insecurity is more connected with territorial contiguity as it ties together members of an RSC in a geostrategic web of security interdependence. It is evident therefore that most political and military threats spin more easily along adjacent areas than along distant ones.⁶ According to Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, a security complex refers, simply speaking, to a group of states whose security is so interdependent and interconnected that their security problems neither can reasonably be explained nor be resolved in isolation from one another.⁷ An RSC is marked off from its counterparts elsewhere by four variable characteristics, namely, boundary, anarchy, polarity, and social construction (of enmity and amity).⁸

To explain how the intersubjective structures of enmity and amity are constructed Buzan and Wæver have referred to constructivism, and this article follows suit. Given that security is “socially constructed rather than objective,”⁹ it is important to see whether security interdependence among units of an RSC is defined by amity or enmity which, in turn, entails looking into how the units view each other. While recognizing the causal relevance of material factors to states’ behavioral properties, constructivists place greater emphasis on intersubjective understanding of actors in directing action.¹⁰ Thus, what is more important than the elements of anarchy and distribution of power in a security complex is how states see each other through the identity spectacles. It is so because states view their counterparts in the frame of identity they ascribe to them, while reproducing their own identity.¹¹ It is in this context that Alexander Wendt’s

Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian cultures of anarchy or “competitive,” “individualistic,” and “cooperative” security systems¹² (based on how states perceive each other; as enemies, rivals, and friends, respectively) correspond closely to RSCT’s conflict formation, security regime, and security community.¹³ Much like the character of an RSC, the way to transform an enmity-based security interdependence into amity-based one is cognitive or ideational which involves, first and foremost, a critical examination and, ultimately, breakdown of old intersubjective structures of mutual perception/identification as well as its sustaining patterns of interaction.¹⁴ In simple words, such a transformation first requires states to change the cognitive lenses through which they were used to see each other. Such a change would result in different patterns of behavior and interaction in interstate relations.

Speaking of the PG sub-complex, it can be said that it is characterized by enmity, produced by mistrust, fear, and bitter historical memories, and sustained by the dual processes of securitization and negative identifications. Added to this is the role of non-littoral powers in sustaining the historical relations of enmity between Iran and its PG neighbors primarily by securitizing the identity and role of the former. It is, however, not to propose that geopolitical factors are irrelevant to the pattern of enmity, and hence conflict, formation in the PG sub-complex. They indeed play an instrumental role, but only through intersubjective-ideational filters. It is so because what are conventionally taken for granted as the “products” of geopolitics or realpolitik (such as social threats and securities dilemmas) are neither intrinsic to international relations nor the outgrowths of anarchy.¹⁵

Why Iran wants to Localize PG Security?

To explain why Iran wants to localize regional security one has to, argue the authors, look into Iran’s (historically informed) self-perception and its security¹⁶ requirements. An attempt has been in this section to “rationalize” Iran’s desire to indigenize PG security.

To begin with, Iran has inherited from its long history a legacy of being a top-tier regional power as well as a great civilization with a flourishing culture. In terms of territory, Iran had lost, by the turn of 20th century, much of what once constituted the “*Iran*

zamin” (the land of Iran). Yet, the idea of Iranian-ness and the sense of nationhood—the reflection of which can be seen in Abolqasem Ferdowsi’s 11th century epic the *Shahnameh*—has always remained intact in the national psyche of Iran. It is through this unaltered mental map of Iranian-ness that Iranians look back to their history. The people of Iran have an emotional bond with their history which weaves the past into the present, and vice versa. In other words, past is never lost in the present in Iran.¹⁷

When Iran defines the “Self,” it takes into account its history of being an independent regional power for centuries which, in turn, informs its regional policy. Leaders in Tehran view Iran’s “historical depth” (*umuq-e tarikhi*) or having deep historical roots as one of the constituent elements of the country’s identity.¹⁸ This historicized view of the self has also produced an aggrandized image of the self, which is based on a mythical sense of being more capable than what actual capabilities bear out.¹⁹ Having perceived Iran as the most powerful regional state,²⁰ Tehran demands that both regional states and major powers should recognize Iran’s eminent role in West Asia and beyond, and should respect its “legitimate” rights, interests as well as security concerns.²¹

The 1979 revolution reinvigorated and augmented the Islamic character of Iranian self-perception or identity, weakened by the secularizing drive of the Pahlavi regime, with a sense of revolutionary exceptionalism. This led to the development of what an author has termed an “[Islamic] utopian-romantic, even hubristic self-perception,”²² in Tehran, which still seems to be shaping Iranian world view. It is under this self-perception that Iran seeks primacy in the region and refuses to be part of any western-led regional “equilibrium.”²³ The formidable challenge to Iran’s drive for regional primacy is the presence of extra-regional powers in the region, which is viewed in Tehran as causing insecurity, instability, and tensions in the region.²⁴ And the “presence of an important and powerful” state (read: Iran) is considered fundamental for regional stability.²⁵

Iran’s opposition to the presence of foreign forces in the region is also driven by its revolutionary ideology which calls for resisting against the attempts of domination by what it terms

“arrogant” western powers. In sum, Iran’s self-perception as, inter alia, as an independent (Islamic) regional power coupled with its discourse of independence (*istiqlal*) and resistance against “domineering” powers, has created an attitude of defiance or, what Anoushiravan Ehteshami has termed, “the arrogance of non-submission.”²⁶ This has held back Tehran from either accepting the presence of foreign forces in the region as an unescapable reality or finding a *modus vivendi* with them. Tehran is of the view that any acceptance of the role of major powers in safeguarding regional stability will result—in addition to deviation from the revolutionary path—Iran becoming a junior partner and its interests as subordinated to that of the major powers.²⁷

As hinted earlier, another important factor in Iran’s emphasis on the localization of regional security is its historically informed threat perception. From Alexander the Great’s invasion and occupation of Persia in first half of the 4th century BC till today a sense of insecurity vis-à-vis foreign powers has always persisted in Iranian national consciousness and strategic culture. The space of this article does not allow to go into details of Iran’s historical traumas. Suffice it to say that the encroachment on its territory by foreign powers continued intermittently till the turn of the 20th century (consider Iranian territorial losses in the Caucasus in the first half of 19th century in its two wars with Czarist Russia). As to the loss of political independence, examples abound. Beginning in the Qajar era and running through much of the second Pahlavi Shah’s rule, the realpolitik practiced by major powers, such as Russia and Britain, in the region left Iran with virtually no political independence, even in domestic affairs. The 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention to divide Iran into their respective spheres of influence, the invasion and occupation of Iran during WWII by Russian and British troops despite Tehran’s declaration of neutrality in the war, and the Anglo-American orchestrated coup against the popularly elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, are a few examples of how Iran was treated as a piece in the chessboard of major power politics.

After the revolution, the theo-democratic regime of Ayatollah Khomeini “ideologized” the popular anti-imperialist sentiments within an Islamic-revolutionary discursive context. Soon after

the revolution the slogan “neither east nor west, [only the] Islamic Republic” was raised to demonstrate that Iran was now in defiance of the system of domination. And, any association (of regional states) with that system was perceived as a threat to regional stability. According to R.K. Ramazani, one of the three conditions in Khomeini’s notion of PG security was cutting of all links between the PG states and the cold war superpowers.²⁸ If the statements of Iranian leaders in the post-Khomeini era are viewed, it could easily be concluded that Iran still believes what Khomeini maintained decades ago.

According to Sina Azodi, Iran has always been suspicious as well as wary of military presence of outsiders in the region, and have employed different strategies to oust them since the arrival of extra-regional forces in the PG in the 16th century.²⁹ This historical suspicion and wariness got translated into state discourses, narratives, slogans as well as policies in the post-revolutionary era. Today, one can barely find any statement of Iranian leaders that does not refer to some enemy or enemies’ plots to harm Iran. When Tehran talks about enemy it refers first and foremost to the US which, according to the supreme leader, wants to dominate the region and imperil the power and survival of Iran.³⁰

Frustrated by its inability to expel foreign, especially American, forces from the PG, Iran has invested on the expansion of its “strategic depth.” In Iranian strategic doctrine, defense policy is not limited to preserving its own territorial integrity, it is also about expanding what Khamenei calls “trans-religious resistance identity” in the region. Through the expansion of this identity and the maintenance of a broad trans-territorial outlook,³¹ Iran wants to expand its strategic depth in the region because it dissuade enemies from embarking on any aggression against Iran. It is perhaps the Iranian desire to expand the resistance identity in the region which is often interpreted by some Arab PG states as Tehran’s agenda to export its revolution.³²

Why Tehran has failed in Localization of Regional Security?

The Iranian failure in regionalizing PG security lies primarily in different perspectives of Iran and the GCC states on what constitutes security and stability of the region. For Iran, regional security cannot be brought from abroad,³³ and that only Iran and

its PG neighbors are responsible for the security of the region. Viewing itself as a key player in the PG, Iran is of the view that any arrangement or scheme for regional security and stability that excludes Iran is “futile,”³⁴ and that regional peace cannot be ensured without Iran’s participation.³⁵ Emphasizing inclusion and regional multilateralism, Iran has always called for creating a regional security structure which would involve all states of the region. More recently, in late 2019, Iran has proposed a “Coalition for Hope” (dubbed as “Hormuz Peace Endeavor;” HOPE) and has urged its Arab neighbors to participate. The HOPE initiative is aimed at promoting peace and stability in the region primarily by enhancing understanding, cooperation, and friendly relations among the regional states.³⁶ While emphasizing an all-inclusive collective approach to address regional security issues, Iran maintains that security cannot be achieved in the region by compromising the security of any other state. For Iran, either all regional states enjoy security or every state is deprived of it.³⁷ It is worthy to note that from the Iranian standpoint all regional issues can be resolved by the PG states themselves through dialogue and mutual understanding, and that rifts and disagreements are to the benefit of the “enemies” of the region, especially the global arrogance, represented by the US, and Zionism.³⁸

As against Iran’s campaign for the localization of PG security, the GCC states prefer greater international role in the region. Their approach to regional security can be called as internationalization of the PG security. It is mainly through importing huge volumes of arms (thanks to the petrodollar recycling) from abroad, providing military bases and facilities to and signing security agreements with major powers (particularly the US), fostering politics based on balance of power calculations, and, perhaps most importantly, securitizing Iran’s role and influence in the region that the GCC has succeeded in making the issue of regional security as an international concern. Closely linked with the GCC policy of internationalization is the “Arabization” of the regional politics and security, which is aimed at enlisting non-littoral Arab countries to countervail Tehran’s influence in the region and at casting its bilateral disputes with Iran as matters involving the entire Arab world.

Another crucial factor in GCC states' policy of internationalization of PG security—and Iran's failure in localizing it—is their bilateral disputes and disagreements as well as different threat perceptions vis-à-vis Iran. As to the latter, there is no unified stance in the GCC on how to deal with Iran. Some states, such as Qatar and Oman, seem not anxious about Iranian regional influence as against others, such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE. It is, therefore, problematic in this regard to talk about Iran-GCC relations. Likewise, there are a number of regional issues where the GCC states lack a common ground, and are driven by their parochial interests. This clearly demonstrates that they have failed (thus far) in moving away from the Machiavellian logic of politics. In recent years, smaller states in the GCC appear to be wary of Riyadh's foreign policy activism and its "adventurist" response to regional crises (consider the kingdom's ongoing invasion of Yemen), not to mention its efficient manipulation of the bloc's decision-making procedures. Riyadh, under the de facto rule of the crown prince Muhammad bin Salman, has appeared in recent years to be less tolerant towards any defying attitude on the part of its fellow GCC states. Just to give an example, Qatar was presented in June 2017 with thirteen demands to be met within ten day by some regional states in the lead of Saudi Arabia. Following Qatar's refusal (or inability) to comply with the demands the Saudi-led coalition imposed a total blockade (land, sea, and air) over the former. Worst of all, the Saudi-UAE bipartite planned an invasion of Qatar in summer of the same year, to be cancelled only by the intercession of Rex Tillerson, the then US secretary of state.³⁹

Finally, there is the "American factor" in keeping the issue of PG security internationalized, but effectively under its own control. It would be not an exaggeration to say that the US has become the only extra-regional military leviathan in the PG, committed to prevent any state (regional or non-regional) from establishing its hegemony.⁴⁰ To ensure that its hegemony in the region is not seriously challenged by any state, it has maintained its military presence in all PG states as well as naval presence in and around the PG waterway (*Khalij-e Fars* in Persian). It appears that the US is not much concerned with regional security and stability

unless its dominance is threatened. It is perhaps this reason that it has never played a substantial role in mediating and resolving regional crises (consider its failure or lack of interest in resolving the Saudi-Qatar stand-off), not to mention its preference for making bilateral security agreements with individual GCC states than treating them as a bloc and pushing them to create a concrete, what Karl Deutsch has called, “security community.” The primary factor in making the US directly relevant to the issue of PG security is its centrality in containing what it often calls the “Iranian threat.” The US appears to do whatever is in its capacity to curtail Iranian regional influence and to squeeze the regime in Tehran through economic sanctions in a way that pressure from below would overthrow it. If one is to put the various dimensions of American Iran policy together in a single sentence, it would be that Washington wants Iran to act like a “normal” state,⁴¹ which is translated in Iran as an American craving to turn it into a state acquiescent to the demands of the global system of domination.⁴²

As against the American labelling of Iran as a destabilizing actor, Iran maintains that it is not a threat to regional states and that the US is fomenting Iranophobia—fearmongering in the name of Iran—to isolate it, to sell arms to regional states, and to maintain its domination. While questioning what the US is doing in the region, thousands of miles away from Washington, Iran calls the PG “home.”⁴³ Iran sees the security of the region tied with the withdrawal of the US forces from the region and the end to influx of its arms and meddling in regional affairs.⁴⁴

Iran’s unsuccessful bid to establish a credible regional collective security structure or to come to an understanding with non-littoral powers has driven it to two directions: bolstering and augmenting indigenous asymmetrical war-fighting capabilities and expanding what it calls the “geography of [the axis of] resistance” by enlisting non-state actors (NSAs) into alliance. This dual approach is primarily a defensive-deterrent strategy to ensure national security, and seems to be in line with the Iranian conception of strategic depth or *umuq-e rah ’bordi*. The Iranian idea of strategic depth is grounded on what Khamenei calls “defense at a distance,”⁴⁵ that is, engaging the enemy outside national borders in a way that it would not attack Iran directly.

Turning to Iran's idea of regional security, when Tehran speaks about security in the PG, it primarily refers to preserving the PG waterway and the Strait of Hormuz (*Tangeh-ye Hormuz*), located between the PG and Gulf of Oman, from being manipulated by any external power to undermine or endanger the economic or geostrategic interests of the littoral states. The significance of the PG waterway to Iran in terms of its economy and security is so obvious that anyone can discern only by looking into the map of the region. What is needed to highlight here is that the waterway also has a (historically informed) symbolic relevance to Iran's self-perception, that is, it symbolizes Iran's centuries-long presence, influence, and power in the region and its desire to be accepted as the "superpower" of the region.⁴⁶ It is perhaps this reason that Iran has always resisted attempts to change the historical name of this stretch of water. The Arab states, on the contrary, insist on calling it "Arabian Gulf" ostensibly to deny the historical prominence of Iran as an independent political entity in the region. Iran seems determined to thwart any attempt by, what is calls, "US, Zionist proxies" to rename the waterway.⁴⁷ To highlight the historical name of the waterway Iran also celebrates April 30, which is also the anniversary of the departure of Portuguese forces from PG in 17th century, as National Persian Gulf Day.

Conclusion

The PG is one of the, from the standpoint of RSCT, sub-complexes of the Middle Eastern security complex, composed of the member states of the GCC (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE), Iran, and Iraq. It is one of the most significant (in terms of geostrategic location and hydrocarbon resources) as well as volatile regions in the world. Given the massive flow of arms into the region from abroad and the presence of extra-regional forces in all regional countries short of Iran as well as in and around the strategic PG waterway, the region can also be regarded as one of the most weaponized and militarized regions in the world. It has witnessed three all-out wars—namely, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the First Gulf War (1990-1991), and the Iraq War (2003)—and numerous limited armed conflicts. Today, there is hardly any country in the region which feels secure, and is certain about its national security as

there is every possibility that any abrupt development in the region can be like tossing a stick of dynamite into a tinderbox. Furthermore, if we look at the current situation in the region while taking into account the interplay between intersubjective structures of mutual understanding/identification as well as historical patterns of enmity and geopolitics in the PG in post-1979 era, there is little reason to be optimistic about the future prospects of regional peace and stability.

Geopolitical factors, while important, cannot solely explain why there has been uncertainty in the PG with respect to regional peace and stability. Likewise, state policies may be driven by balance of power calculations, but balance of power itself is not something intrinsically imbedded in interstate relations. It is primarily the mutual perception and understanding of states that give meaning to both geopolitical factors and balance of power impetuses. It is so because threats are not always objective, that is, they are constructed in an intersubjective realm of policy-makers, shaped by self-perception, historical experiences, fears, aspirations, and role definitions. If, for example, the policy-making elite in a state identify another state as a friend or an ally, it is highly unlikely that they view the other in a geopolitical or balance of power context.

As hypothesized in this article, the fundamental problem hampering the emergence of any security architecture within the PG is cognitive or ideational. Theoretically speaking, the relationship between the two sides of PG waterway is characterized and driven by a “Hobbesian culture of anarchy,” colored by sustaining patterns of enmity. Both sides have at times seriously attempted to improve relations, but it has yielded no tangible long-lasting results as the underlying cause of hostility (i.e., negative mutual identification) remained intact. Put differently, attempts have been made to mitigate the negative effects of the said culture rather than to transform it into a Lockean or Kantian one, where states see each other as rivals or friends, respectively, not as enemies.

Drawing on how the social construction of the patterns of amity and enmity informs the security interdependence of units of an RSC, this article has outlined the factors responsible for the failure of Iran’s policy of localization of regional security, envisioned in the UN’s Security Council Resolution 598 (para.

8). For the authors, the primary reason for Iran's failure in this regard lies in the contradictory approach towards regional security. As against Iran, the GCC states prefer to keep the issue of regional security internationalized, that is, they want to get major powers involved in maintaining security in the region. Other important factors include intra-GCC differences regarding a number of policy issues as well as different perspectives vis-à-vis Iran's role in the region, and the US military presence there. The historical patterns of enmity between Iran and pre-2003 Iraq, on the one hand, and the GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia, on the other, suggests that the prospects of a peaceful and stable region would remain slim unless both sides of the PG radically change the way they view and define each other. It also shows that Iran's exclusion from any security framework is not part of the solution to regional crises. Iran should not, therefore, be regarded and treated as a regional pariah; rather, its proposals for establishing a collective security system be taken seriously. Secondly, there is the need for Iran to realize that it cannot prosper and feel secure in a hostile neighborhood and that it cannot realize its policy of localization without building trust through practical measures to assuage fears and reservations of its neighbors. Given the level of involvement of the US in the region, all with the consent of the GCC states, Iran should find a *modus vivendi* to work with the former at least in areas of mutual interest. The reluctance on the part of Iran and the GCC-US axis to compromise some aspects of their approach to regional security has created a cycle of conflict formation in the PG which can engulf the region in flames of instability, even of war, at any time.

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