



India's Strategic Interest in the Gulf

Fazal Mahmood*

India's strategic interest in the Gulf evolves around political developments, import of oil and gas and the affluent market for the exports of goods to the region. India as an emerging Asian power with a large population and economic potential has shown a keen interest in the future course of strategic alignment with the Gulf countries. Its rapidly growing economy with increasing requirement of energy coupled with its deficiency in energy resources makes India totally dependent on imports of oil and gas. The forecast of India's growing energy requirements reveals that its dependence on oil and gas will further grow to ninety percent by the year 2020. It holds strong energy ties with the Gulf countries. The Gulf region possesses largest oil and natural gas reserves. Its cheapest cost of production of oil and gas and the overall well developed energy exploring infrastructure makes it a viable partner for economic ties. The region has the potential to serve to meet the growing global demand of energy. Oil is still a predominantly major source of energy in the world. Its assured availability is not only desirable but highly essential for the economic development of oil and gas deficient countries.

Additionally, the Gulf happens to be a capital surplus region and lucrative market for foreign goods. India, in future would be most interested in finding the potential market of the Gulf region for the export of consumer goods and high-tech products. India is presently trying hard to enhance its economic ties with the Gulf region.

India's increase reliance of Gulf oil and gas has further increased her concerned about energy security. In this context Chinese and Pakistanis

* Reader, Centre of West Asian Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India

endeavors and initiatives in the Gulf region pose a serious challenge to India's strategic interests there. It is high time for India to forge close political and military ties with the Gulf States to neutralize the influence of China and Pakistan.

The present study is intended to examine the growing geopolitical implications of economic relations between India and the Gulf States. This will also undertake a brief analysis of rival Asian Power's threat to India's strategic interests in this region.

The present study will focus primarily on the following three critical issues:-

- (i) Geo-political significance of the Gulf with regard to the availability of energy resources.
- (ii) Evolution of India, Pakistani and Chinese perspectives towards the Gulf region.
- (iii) Foods security problems of the Gulf States.

Since focus of the problem under study is mainly on India's endeavors and initiatives in the Gulf region, the study would be based primarily on Indian sources, foreign sources and other relevant material.

Geo-political Aspects of the Gulf

The Gulf has assumed important strategic and economic dimensions in contemporary international politics. It has long been labeled as strategically important for elementary reasons of geography. Geographical factors play an important role in transforming the Gulf into a dynamic region of the world. It has been a channel of trade and communication between the centres of ancient civilization and the outer world from times immemorial. It had been the cockpit of European powers rivalry after the discovery of the Cape route and, till 1970 the Gulf was regarded as British lake.

The Gulf littoral states have truly become the world's centre of economic activity because of their immense oil resources. The increasing demand of oil as a source of energy in the developed and third world countries has made the Gulf region prominent from economic point of

view. The huge oil wealth after the oil price revolution of 1973-74, encouraged the Gulf States to launch massive development programmes. They have also started investing in industrial and financial ventures in other parts of the world.¹ Hence, the capability to invest in various project at home and abroad have greatly enhanced the economic significance of the Gulf region. That is why the interests of many nations are converged on the events and their outcome in the Gulf.

(i) Strategic Significance

The most important geographical factor which makes the Gulf as one of the most important region of the world is its location. Its geographical location in contemporary global setting is geopolitically significant and worthwhile. Geographically speaking the Gulf which covers an area of about 2,50,000 sq km, is almost an inland sea. It is approximately eight hundred km long and its breadth varies from 288 km at its widest to 40 km at the Strait of Hormuz. It extends from the mouth of the Shatt-al-Arab in Iraq in south-easterly direction to the Strait of Hormuz. Below the Gulf in the south-eastern direction lies the Gulf of Oman.² The two Gulfs form a composite geopolitical unit. On either side of the Gulf lie the two plateaus of Iran and Arabia and on its Western coastline lie the eastern province of Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States.³

The central position of the Gulf as one of the main highway between east and west has long invested it with special importance. During the ancient and medieval periods Europe was connected with Asia by the Gulf route. It was one of the important and most prosperous routes of the Mediterranean trade. With the advent of modern times, the importance of the Gulf route did not decline. During the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries this route, also referred to as direct route, was well organized and sometimes described as usual route of the East.⁴ Portuguese explorers in the 16th century and British, French and Dutch Trading companies in the 17th and 18th centuries, sought to established exclusive trading monopolies in the Gulf region. Till the opening of the Suez Canal, the direct route remained in regular and constant use as the most dependable of all the channels for overland communication with the East. At last, of all the European powers only Britain remained the most dominant power in the east. It entered into a wide variety of treaties, agreements and arrangements with the rulers of the Gulf countries.⁵ The exclusive treaties entailed the Pax Britannica,

which insulated the Arab territories from external developments over a century and half.⁶

The Gulf basin is a midway point between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. This accords strategic advantages to the powers dominating in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. The control or domination of a particular part of the Gulf region would give one power a decisive military advantage at time of crisis.⁷

The oil trade has transformed the Gulf into an important geo-strategic region of the world. Today, it is a vital channel for the export of oil. The Gulf is connected with the Indian Ocean through a narrow opening known as Strait of Hormuz. It is considered as a strategic choke point for the varied external oil and non-oil sea-borne trade of all the Gulf countries. It connects the world's largest known site of oil reserves and production i.e. The Gulf region to the world's highest consumption regions-Western Europe, Asia, Pacific and the US. Thus, the Strait of Hormuz is vital to oil importing countries of the world. Like wise, the Strait of Hormuz is not less significant to the Gulf States themselves. They earn substantial revenues through oil export which in turn constitute backbone of their economies. Besides, the Gulf States are also dependent on non-oil sea-borne Trade. They import food items, consumer's goods, industrial equipments, capital goods, arms etc. from outside the Gulf region to fulfill the growing needs of the population, for country's economic development and defence.⁸

(ii) Economic Significance

The Gulf's economic significance lies in the fact that it has become the world's most important centre of economic activity because of its immense oil resources and oil revenues. It holds highest percentage of world's known oil reserves and occupies top place on the world's reserves map. The contribution of oil as the primary source of energy is highest among the all other existing sources of energy. Until the development of an economically viable alternative source of energy, oil will remain an indispensable energy source. The development of an economically viable alternative is not likely or possible in the near future. This makes the Gulf's oils reserves important rather essential to the economies of the oil importing countries.⁹

The huge oil reserves and very low costs of production made the Gulf oil industry the most outstanding economic zone of the world. In terms of proven oil reserves, Gulf's share is significant. It holds 62 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and, of the total OPEC' proven oil reserves about 82 percent are located in this region. Similarly about 90.6 percent of the regional subtotal is found in the Gulf region. In terms of daily production of oil, the share of the Gulf countries in the total world production is quite substantial and imperative to the oil importing nations, accounting 30% of the world total production. Of the total OPEC's daily oil production, it constitutes 72 per cent.¹⁰

The vast reserves of natural and associated gases of the Gulf States are too significant from the energy point of view. The region holds 82 percent of the total OPEC reserves and 40 percent of total world proven reserves. Supply and demand of natural gas, the world's fastest growing energy sources, has increased by 15% over the last five years. The increasing world energy demand has created oil supply gap due to imbalances in supply and demand. Natural gas is expected to fill his void.

The Gulf region, on account of substantial oil wealth, is considered as most preferable region for the establishments of economic exchanges.¹¹ The Gulf countries especially the members of the GCC have deposited more than \$ 2 trillion in assets in the global financial system. In the region, GCC is the main trading bloc and in 2006 it attracted \$ 3.8 billion of foreign direct investment (FDI). These inflows of FDI will likely to increase in the future due to liberalization of economy, improved governance and the relaxation of trade barriers. They are also trying to encourage free market system with a single currency.¹²

India's Interest

India's relations with the Gulf countries have always been intimate and cordial. The relationship between them has been traditionally close and friendly and based on firm foundations of political, economic and cultural links. Archaeological evidences indicate that contacts between Indian subcontinent and the Gulf region existed five thousand years ago. Geographical proximity, historical trade links and cultural relations have all continued to sustain and nurture the long standing relationship over the years.

India's economic and political interests in the Gulf region are integral part of the Indian strategic posture towards the entire Gulf region and the Red Sea basin. India regards that the Gulf must remain a stable and unimpeded source of energy for its economic well-being. ONGC Videsh Ltd. is now seeking to acquire equity investment in oil and gas fields in the Gulf region.¹³

India with over a billion people ranks sixth in the world in terms of energy demand. It has very meager oil reserves which amount to 6 bn barrels with total proven, probable and possible reserves of close to 12 bn barrels. Its share in global oil reserves accounts for only 0.6 percent. India depends nearly 70 percent on imported oil, of which 65 per cent comes from the Gulf region.¹⁴ Saudi Arabia is India's biggest supplier of oil contributing approximately 22 percent of India's total imports of 1.9 m b/d. Steady and accelerating development in different sectors of the economy over the past decade has caused a steep rise in India's energy requirements. It is projected that by 2010 India may replace South Korea as the world's fourth largest consumer of energy, after the US, China and Japan. The demand is growing at the rate of 5.80 percent annually, and oil and gas combined together constitute about 41% of India's total energy requirements.¹⁵ With its growing dependence on imported oil and gas, stability in the Gulf region have become crucial to its economic wellbeing.

There are 4.5 millions Indians reside in the Gulf region and form a formidable workforce. They remit valuable amount around \$ 8 bn annually to India. These remittances are valuable sources of foreign exchange earnings and play vital role in India's balance of payment.¹⁶ India still has largest pool of skilled and unskilled young people in the world. And the demand for skilled and unskilled workers is still high in the Gulf countries. A significant portion of this labour force may get employment in the Gulf region.¹⁷ Protector of Emigrant's office confirmed a rise in demand for manpower in the Gulf specially in construction and, oil and gas sectors. Stability in Gulf region is not only critical mainly because India depends on the region for oil but also because of the huge Indian Diaspora there.¹⁸

The Gulf countries' share in India's foreign trade comprises 15 per cent. The buoyancy in trade relationship has already begun to emerge. India's non oil trade with the GCC stands at \$ 20 bn and is expected to touch a level of \$ 25 bn by the year 2010.¹⁹ In 2004-2005 India's export

to the GCC valued at \$ 10 bn and import from these countries stood \$ 7 bn. India imports \$ 50 bn worth oil out of the total annual imports of \$ 145 bn. Two third of India's oil import is from the GCC.²⁰ India's trade with the GCC countries in terms of exports have registered an increase of 33.04% between 2003-2005 and imports went up by 115% during the same period.²¹

India has emphasized that the relationship between the two sides should be cemented by investment. India and the Gulf share importance of strategic relations for promoting the close economic co-operation in the present global environment. The strategic relevance of the Gulf region for India is immense and they must cement this relationship not only by trade, but also by investment.²² The September 2001 attacks in the US have triggered a chain of events that had help to make the GCC more receptive to developments in Asia specially India and China.²³ India has decided to sign a Comprehensive Economic Co-operation Agreement (CECA) with the GCC states. This agreement will cover trade, investment and services. Both the sides have agreed to open dialogue on the proposed Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The proposed GCC FTA will unleash greater dynamism in regional economic integration by relaxing trade barriers.²⁴ India is looking for large investment from the Gulf region, which has flushed with funds due to the surge in oil prices. It is likely to attract investments to the tune of Rs.50,000 corers from GCC state in the next five years, in the areas of refining, real estate and construction.²⁵ India is a preferred destination for Gulf investment because of her liberal economic policy. The economic relations between India and the GCC are changing rapidly. Faced with rising unemployment rates and finite oil and gas reserves, GCC countries are now serious about diversifying their economic base. Countries with small oil and gas deposits have already taken steps in this direction. They sought Indian expertise in information technologies, biotechnology, small and medium enterprises, and education. With the political, cultural, and business environment in the west deteriorating, many Arab countries have begun to look East.²⁶ According to a diplomat, the GCC needs "an integrated package" from India that should cover all aspects of relationship.²⁷ Oman's Minister of commerce and Industry, Maqbool Bin Ali Sultan, said "India is a promising market for energy. The opportunity will continue to exist for exporting greater quantities of oil and gas to India".²⁸ The United Progressive Alliance Government has embarked on

a path of “widening and deepening” relationship with countries in the region. The growing ties reflected in the number of visits by leaders of these countries to India and vice versa, and exchange of business and trade delegations.²⁹ Emphasizing importance of India to the Gulf countries, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated “our neighbour should have a greater stake in our economic growth and should benefit from it... The Gulf region is a part of our natural economic hinterland”³⁰. The visit of King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia to New Delhi in January 2006, no doubt, boosted India’s economic and political ties with the Gulf region. He is the most influential representative of the GCC countries. His visit to New Delhi has sent right signals within the grouping to build a closer relationship with New Delhi. India and Iran also share a common strategic outlook. After landmark visit of the Iranian President Mohammad Khatami’s in January 2003 to India and signing of the New Delhi Declaration, bilateral relations have progressed gradually.³¹

Over the last few years Pakistan and China have witnessed rapid economic growth. This led to sharp spike in energy requirements of these countries. With their continuous economic growth, energy issues of Pakistan and China are becoming increasingly prominent. They need sustainable supply of energy for socio-economic development. Domestic energy resources of Pakistan and China are insufficient to meet growing internal demands. They are trying to deepen their economic relations with the Gulf States. The evolution of Pakistanis and Chinese perspectives towards the Gulf region posed challenge to India’s energy security. A brief assessment of Pakistanis and Chinese efforts to establish enduring economic links with the Gulf States will not be out of context.

Pakistan and the Gulf

Since inception, Pakistan made all possible efforts to create an “Islamic bloc” against the perceived threat from India. The motive was to assert its international personality. The emergence of India as a leader of non-aligned movement and the cool response of Muslim States regarding Islamic bloc, isolated Pakistan diplomatically. Later to balance the strategic threat from India, Pakistan joined the US-backed regional military associations’ viz. SEATO and CENTO and also signed Mutual Defense Agreement with US in 1954. Pakistan’s geographical proximity with the Gulf region enhanced its strategic significance in US calculations for defense of West Asia. The rise of Pan Arab feelings in West Asia and emergence

of Iran as a greater strategic asset for the West declined Pakistan's importance. The second Islamic Summit which was held in Pakistan in 1974 brought it closer with the Gulf Countries. After Summit Pakistan signed military protocols with Kuwait, Oman, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 revived its strategic significance. Pakistan was used as conduit for supply of arms and money to the Afghan Mujahideen by the West. The first Gulf war (1991) brought Pakistan closer to the Gulf States particularly Saudi Arabia. She participated by contributing over 6000 troops to US-led coalition against Iraq. Pakistan's relation with the Gulf States transforms after September 11 events. They decided to co-operate in the area of counter terrorism. In 2005 Pakistan signed Framework Agreement on economic co-operation with the GCC states. It may form basis for Free Trade Agreement between Pakistan and the GCC countries.³²

China and the Gulf

The spectacular growth of the Chinese economy in the 1990s has made China a net importer of energy. China constitutes one of the potentially most important actors in the Gulf affairs. Its interests include strategic consideration, the need to import Gulf oil and gas, and trade relations outside the energy sector. Of all the challenges regarding energy issues, oil security is the most important and dominant in China. It has sought to consolidate its energy partnership with the Gulf Producers. In 1999 the then Chinese president Jiang Zemin visited Saudi Arabia and announced the creation of "strategic partnership" between the two nations.³³

China is the world's second largest consumer of energy after the US. China imports roughly 2 million b/d, half of which comes from West Asia particularly the Gulf. It is predicted that within a quarter of a century, China will import 10 million b/d. China's dependency on imported oil is increasing continuously, rising from 7.6% in 1995 to 34.5 in 2003. China's oil demand is greatly outpacing its supply. China during the period between 1993-2003 witnessed an annual growth rate of oil consumption of 5.11%. The world average during the same period was 1.37%. China's annual oil supply growth during the same period reached below 1%. Based on current annual growth rate of oil consumption, it is predicted that China's oil consumption will exceed 400 million tones in 2009 and climb further up to 500 million tones in the 2010. China's oil supply shortage is projected

to rise from 1.7 million b/d in 2001 to 9.4 million b/d in the year 2025. Since 1999 West Asia and North Africa has been China's major sources of crude oil imports, and these imports have accounted for 70% of China's aggregate crude imports. At present, oil imported from Russia, Central Asia and other parts of world would help China improve its oil security, there is no denying that West Asia and North Africa has been and would continue to be most vital source in China's oil security concern.³⁴ It may be argued that China's growing dependence on Gulf's oil presents strategic opportunity for Sino-Arab energy cooperation.

Food Security

The Gulf countries, at the moment are confronting the problem of providing food to the fast growing population. They are seriously concerned about their growing dependency on the richer food producers of the West. The fear of dependence on high-cost food supplies from the West has created a genuine feeling of insecurity in the region. The goal of self-sufficiency in food production is, therefore, the national priority of all the governments of the Gulf States. They are striving hard to ensure optimum level of food security as it is closely linked with political stability and regime security. In the Gulf region, however topographical features and harsh climatic conditions play an important and often directly controlling role on human occupancy.

Arable land covers a very small part of the surface area of the region. Of the total land surface about 4-5% is available for cultivation. Most of the states are confronted by a severe limitation of land suitable for agricultural expansion. Desert reclamation is one source through which horizontal expansion of agriculture is possible, but it is a very expensive option. It requires sophisticated technology, skill and huge funds. Moreover, it is a temporary solution and works for a short period of time. Reclaimed land remains fertile for agricultural purpose only for few years and is suitable for farming temporarily, as it again turns into desert after sometimes.³⁵

Water has always been in short supply in the Gulf region. There are currently two principal sources of fresh water supply: under ground water reserves and the desalination of sea water. The cost of desalination is very high and hence it is not economically viable to use such water in irrigated agriculture. Persistent conventional method of irrigation in the Gulf region continues to cause salinity and water-logging problems.

Although, there is an increasing use of sub-surface sprinkler irrigation method on the newer schemes, now surface irrigation still dominates in the region. Under this system water losses through evaporation can be up to 70%. There are many agricultural favoured areas in the Gulf where sub-surface water reserve has been permanently damaged due to excess pumping.³⁶ It is suggested that the rate of run-down of the aquifer is significantly greater than the rate of recharge. In the Gulf region these sub-surface water reserves formed the life-line on which the local agricultural economics relied. There is evidence that sub-surface water reserves at some places in the Gulf region have already begun to suffer from salinity build-up within the soil. Consequently, many fertile areas have been rendered unsuitable for cultivation because salt water intrusions caused by excessive pumping has ruined the aquifer.

It is clear, however, that there are limits to feasible agricultural development. The overall trend in fact is rather alarming. The agricultural production in the Gulf region may shrink as a proportion of national product, even in absolute size, instead of increase.

Physical landscape and arid climatic conditions prevent the Gulf States from devising coherent agricultural development strategies for the long term. These factors inevitably limit and constrain the potential for agricultural expansion and the national goal of self reliance in food production. Further oil economy has steadily drawn people away from the rural areas, sometimes leading to the collapse of the irrigation system upon which agriculture had for centuries depended.

The Gulf states are currently seriously concerned about the growing demand of food and the resultant risk involved in import of high cost food supplies from the West. Their dependency on richer food producers can make them vulnerable. There is growing realization among the Gulf governments that at a future date they can become hostage of the richer food producers. The fear is that an oil embargo would be answered by a food embargo. In view of this, some Gulf governments are constrained to invest in agriculture sector at higher cost for food production in their own countries. The Western countries, on the other hand, may derail the Gulf efforts to become self reliant in food production. Their policy is to make the Gulf States dependent on them in agriculture. They do not support high-cost agriculture in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia's achievement in wheat

production in 1983 was severally criticized by the US Secretary of Agriculture. He, learning the cost of these efforts, offered all the wheat at a fraction of Saudi production costs. The Europeans, too, are critical of high cost agriculture in the Gulf.³⁷ The rich western states in general have surplus food for export but at very high cost, they keep the prices of food produced artificially high through the government policies of farm price support. Most Gulf States fear the enhanced potential dependency on high-cost food supplies from the West.

India's topographical features and climatic conditions provide surplus wealth of fertile soil and water resources. It has significant reserves of cultivable land which, if properly managed and organized, could provide an assured supply of food to the Gulf States at a much lower price than the West. This will provide an incentive for significant Gulf investment in India. The Gulf States can afford reasonable farm price support by investing in India and thus can reduce their dependence on high-cost food supplies from the West. They can also avoid investments in higher-cost food production in their own countries. The managerial, technological, environmental and infrastructural facilities can help in developing large-scale food production in India which can provide long term resolution of food security problem of the Gulf States. A genuine interdependence in the area of food production may be developed between the Gulf States and India. India is not short of ideas, technology and management skills and there is potential for a greater degree of cooperation and interdependence in the area of food production. Geographical proximity and other resources such as fertile soil, and availability of cultivable land, all support India as a very suitable destination for the Gulf requirement of agricultural development. And in due course of time India may become "the granary of Gulf" - a viable and stable alternative of food security of the Gulf countries.

Conclusion

All the three countries are seeking to deepen their economic and political relations with the Gulf States. The aim is to forge enduring economic links in a meaningful way. There is inevitable need to evolve a concerted move to adopt proper economic strategy so that objective of energy security could be achieved. It would enhance energy security for both sides and contribute to global economic stability and prosperity. Further the long

term energy strategic co-operation will pave the way for both consumer and supplier to further collaborate in other areas like politics, culture, science and technology.

Of all the major economies on the main land of South Asia, India possess little oil and gas resources, and the existing gap between demand and supply will expand as the economy continue to grow. To strengthen energy partnership, India should forge close political and military ties with their oil and gas suppliers. Strategically India shares similar stand with Gulf States on issues such as the legitimacy of using nuclear energy for civilian purposes, opposing to economic sanctions, and peaceful resolution of the Arab Israel conflict that would guarantee Palestinian rights.

The GCC states maintain close strategic ties with the U.S. Their pro-American orientation, combined with increasing Indo-US security co-operation presents India a great opportunity to enhance its diplomatic influence in the region. Flushed with funds following the surge in oil prices, GCC states are looking at profitable investment in Asia including India. India should repair a road map identifying areas for joint venture and co-operation with the GCC.

India is a nuclear power and its military capabilities, both conventional and non conventional, are on the rise. In short, India has the necessary ingredient to become a global power. India regards the Gulf as a potential breeding ground for terrorism that could be targeted against interests and thus it is determined to assert itself there to prevent that threat and proliferation of. For India, the Gulf region comprises a vast strategic buffer that can not be allowed to become a base from which policies against its interests and security can be pursued with impunity. India should cultivate the Gulf countries in such a way that its energy and other interests are not compromised in the years to come.

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