

Influence of Geography on Iran's Strategic Posture

Muhammad Ajmal Abbasi¹

Abstract:

Nation-states formulate viable strategies for attaining national objectives and employ all the means of power at their disposal, which may primarily be its geographic attributes or the diplomatic, economic, human, and military power. While political, financial, diplomatic as well as military goals shape the strategic thinking of a state, the geography either facilitates the achievement of a country's national objectives or places certain constraints over its policy formulation. Hence, the geographic location of a state is regarded as the only constant among all factors influencing its strategic options while all other aspects are variables. Iran's geographic significance in the South-West Asian Eurasian rim emanates from its ancient Persian legacy, oldest continuously inhabited civilization, and geographic proximity with energy-rich regions. Thus, the geographical disposition of the country and the consequential potential of influencing the regional strategic dynamics have the most pronounced impact on the Iranian strategic posture.

Key Words: Strategy, geography, Eurasian rim, shatter belt, trade transit route, Strait of Hormuz, Rimland, Islamic revolution, Commercial interests

INTRODUCTION

The states traditionally aspire to put in place a viable strategy for achieving the desired national objectives by employing all conceivable means and acquire a prominent status among the community of nations. It has always been deliberated as to what all could be the conceivable means at the disposal of a nation-state for contemplating and executing a rational strategy for attaining desired goals. According to Joint Publication 1-02 (JP 1-02) of the US Department of Defence, Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, a strategy can be defined as the ability “of developing and operating all national power forces to achieve war-zone-level, national, and/ or multinational goals; it is an operation of all the means of power, including geographic conditions and diplomatic, economic, human, and military power” of a nation-state (p. 26). In the hindsight, various factors are influencing the strategy formulation process of a country, however, the impact of each can substantially vary from the other.

While the features such as geographic location, economic capacity, diplomatic potential, and military power shape the strategy of a state, however, each of these aspects can be categorized into constants and variables to quantify the ultimate impact. Prima facie, the geographic location of a state is the only constant among the factors influencing its strategic options, whereas all other aspects are variables, thus disposed to transformation and adaptations. Consequently, political, financial, diplomatic as well as military goals definitely influence and shape the strategic thinking of a state, however, it is the geography that essentially “helps determine whether a given polity will find itself relatively free from threat or surrounded by potential adversaries” (Murray, Knox & Bernstein, 1996, pp. 1-2). Geography can be regarded as the destiny of a country since the

¹ Holds PhD International Relations from Islamic International University, Islamabad, Pakistan. He specializes in the areas of war studies, Afghanistan and Iran affairs. His research interests include conflict management, geopolitics, and political geography. Email: ajmalabbasi23@yahoo.com

geographic location considerably influences its ethnic structure, cultural disposition, and susceptibility to foreign invasions, hence shaping its strategic bearing (Hunter, 2010, p. 17).

The geography of a country is essentially defined in relation to the "landmasses and oceans of the world as a whole, or from the point of view of regional location, that is, with reference to the territory of other states and immediate surroundings" (Spykman, 1938, p. 40). Geography, therefore, reflects the size as well as the location of a state, which are considered to be the key factors in shaping the approach of the policy-makers towards the strategy; while the significance of the geographic location is "overwhelmingly obvious, yet its influence can at times be subtle" (Murray et al., 1996, p. 7). The geographic space of a country can be termed as the "territorial base" where "from it operates in" combat, as well as the pre-conflict "strategic position" emerging as the single most vital influence on the "national policy formulation" process, for being a constant feature (Spykman, 1938, p. 29).

Iran is a modern nation-state with one of the oldest surviving civilizations, a peculiar strategic orientation, and the distinction of being the successor state of the great Persian legacy. The country is geographically located in one of the strategically most vital regions and has the potential to influence the geopolitical, economic as well as military dimensions of the region and beyond. Iran has always been at the center of decisive events taking place in the region, hence prompting the strategists and academicians alike to explore the factors influencing Iranian policies. Essentially, the precious geography, a proud ancient past, focal status with regards to regional trade, vast energy reserves, and existing religious orientation are the prime influences on Iran's strategic orientation. It would be thus prudent to assume that Iran's strategic posture is vital in shaping not only the regional dynamics but the environments of the entire Eurasia.

Impact of Geography on the Strategy

The nation-states, irrespective of their geographical location, size, or global status have four vital national interests in common: "survival, protection of territorial integrity, maintenance or enhancement of economic well-being, and promotion of a favorable world" (Razvi, 1984, p. 64). Spykman (1938) is of the view that since "the geographic characteristics of states are relatively unchanging and unchangeable, geographic demands of these states will remain the same for centuries" - the contention, which puts in place a crucial limitation on the strategic options of a state (p. 29). As geographic disposition exerts a major impact on the strategic preferences by shaping critical doctrinal options, the consequent influences or constraints may, therefore, impose serious restrictions on the viability of a nation's strategic objectives. On the other hand, "strategy is a process, a constant adaptation to shifting conditions and circumstances in a world where chance, uncertainty, and ambiguity dominate" (Murray et al., 1996, p. 1).

Lykke (1989) states that "strategic process is how (concept or way) leadership will use the power (resources or means) to exercise control over sets of circumstances and geographic locations to achieve objectives (ends) in accordance with state policy" (as cited by Yarger, 2006, p. 6). Consequently, "strategic thinking does not occur in a vacuum, or deal in perfect solutions; politics, ideology, and geography shape peculiar national strategic cultures," which may compel a "state to evolve sensible and realistic approaches to the strategic problems that confront it" (Murray et al., 1996, p. 3). Hence, geography can be recognized as a "limitation upon the power of states," and has

a definite influencing impact on statesmanship as well as strategy (Gray, 1991, p. 311). Donnelly (1988) states:

“as individuals are conditioned by the environment in which they grow up, so are governments conditioned by the same environment, and reflect national characteristics. These characteristics are shaped by geography, climate, historical experiences, and religious beliefs, which in turn determine economic circumstances, national prejudices, ideals or ideologies” (as cited by Gray, 1991, p. 314).

The geographical attributes of a country can decisively influence its strategic policymaking, especially if it is located as part of a globally as well as regionally contested territory. More so, if the state in question has a strategically vital location without corresponding power potential due to being a middle or smaller nation, it is destined to confront numerous intrigues from influential players. Conventionally, therefore, the nation-states occupying geographically key territories have found it usually challenging to formulate and pursue a truly sovereign policy and benefit from their strategic as well as economic potential. An interesting case study can be of Iran where the strategic policies of the country have largely been shaped by its geographic attributes. The geography of Iran offers the country immense strategic and economic gains; however, the country being so decisively located is vulnerable to serious external intrigues. Hence, Iran faces challenges due to its central geographical location and has to configure its strategic policies accordingly for preserving survival, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and economic interests.

STRATEGIC EVOLUTION OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS OF IRAN AND BEYOND

Renowned American Naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, “coined the term the Middle East in 1902,” to specify the territories flanked by “Arabia and India” and envisioned “the Indian and Pacific oceans being the hinges of geopolitical destiny,” since these would enable power projection along strategically vital “Eurasian rim” (Kaplan, 2009, pp. 92-93). This is the region where more than often, the strategic interests of regional and trans-regional players like “Russia, Turkey, Iran, India, Pakistan, China, Japan, the Koreas, and the United States collide” (Sempa, 2017, p. 4). Another prominent scholar Nicholas Spykman regarded the coastlines of the “Indian and Pacific oceans” as inevitable for securing the strategic ascendancy over Eurasian landmass as well as the natural resources to limit the continental power potential of Russia (Kaplan, 2009, p. 93). Various scholars have envisaged “South-eastern Europe” being the “part of a strategic zone,” which stretches to the borders of the “ancient Persian empire,” and includes “all of the Middle East, Central Asia and some of the adjoining areas of South Asia” (Blank, 2003, p. 321).

The term “shatter belt” is often used by geographers to describe a geographically vast territory, having vital strategic significance and “occupied by several conflicting states and caught between the conflicting interests of adjoining great powers” (Owens, 1999, p. 69). Cohen (2003) describes the shatter belt as the “strategically oriented regions,” which continue to be deeply fragmented internally, while trapped in the rivalry between “the great powers of the geostrategic realms” (p. 43). While further elaborating the term. Cohen (2014) states that the “shatter belt region is torn by internal conflicts,” with interference by external players exacerbating the disintegration; moreover, “interveners” look for augmenting their own influences through “military, political, and economic” patronage of their respective clients (p. 9). Additionally, the shatter belt regions tend to maintain a notion of status quo due to lack of potential or auspicious strategic settings and fail in

overpowering prevailing “historical, physical, environmental, cultural, and political differences” for establishing a “lasting basis for unified political or economic action” (Blank, 2003, p. 341).

According to Cohen (2014), the Middle Eastern region continues to be a shatter belt, as the fragmentation of this territory is enhanced with events such as the “Arab-Israeli conflict, the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Horn of Africa, and the rise of Iran as a major intrusive force” (p. 49). Kaplan (2009) identifies expanding “geographic connections,” which are “transforming the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian and Pacific oceans into a vast continuum,” hence the “fates of the Middle East on one flank and Indonesia” on the other end of this territory are getting inextricably intertwined (p. 102). Owing to unabated external interventions with rising multi-polarity in the global strategic environments, the shatter belt regions of Eurasia are getting more susceptible to conflict compared to other parts of the world. These regions of the “unstable inner core of Eurasia,” including the “greater Middle East and areas located between the Mediterranean and the Indian subcontinent are shattered zones, which threaten to implode, explode, or maintain a fragile equilibrium” (Kaplan, 2009, p. 105).

ATTRIBUTES OF IRAN'S GEOGRAPHY

The Geographic Significance of Iran

Iran's geographic prominence in the region emanates from its ancient Persian legacy, which is linked with its proud imperial past; “advent of the Achaemenids (549-330 BC) saw the continuation, consolidation, and expansion of the Iranian kingdom” (Venetis, 2011, p. 6). The Iranian landmass has consistently been traversed over the centuries by the “peoples and armies descending from Central Asia,” commencing with “ancient Aryans” and subsequently followed by “the Turkic groups and Mongols” (Bonine, 2003, p. 21). On the other hand, Iranian territory was “the principal conduit for Muslim armies moving into Central Asia or eastward into the Indian subcontinent” (Bonine, 2003, p. 21). Iran has traditionally enjoyed substantial clout in its neighborhood as “one of the oldest continuously inhabited civilizations,” pretending to be a “bridge between the Semitic world and the Indo-Aryan civilization of South Asia” (Bansal, 2012, p. 848). The expansion of Iran's political power has been achieved in succession by various Persian dynasties with growing influence in the adjacent regions of the present Middle East, South Asia as well as Central Asian and Caucasian territories.

Geographically, the Middle East including Iran is termed as a “shatter belt” due to persistently existent dissections in the region besides the “great power” contest, thus the threat of “fragmentation emerges as a dynamic, not a static, process” (Cohen, 2014, p. 375). Iran is thus designated as the “strategic, pivotal state of south-western Asia, straddling two-thirds of the world's oil reserves in the Persian Gulf on its southern flank and major new petroleum fields to the north in the Caspian Sea” (Bonine, 2003, p. 21). The geographic contiguity of Iran with the Caucasus and Central Asia and its status as one of the littoral states of the Caspian Sea promises country “a substantial share of oil and gas resources, “making it a key player in regional energy politics (Starr, 2001, p. 75). Iran's strategic significance and commercial potential are further manifested with the fact that it has “world's second-largest natural gas reserves (behind only Russia),” making it imperative for energy-starved nations like “China and India” to design “energy relationships with” Tehran (Mafinezam & Mehrabi, 2008, p. 82).

Iranian geographical attributes have been acknowledged by eminent scholars and its space is understandably termed as “the center of the universe” (Kile, 2005, p. 51). According to Kemp & Harkavy (1997), the Iranian plateau is flanked by the “Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea,” known to be the “two of world’s major energy basins,” which jointly form an area termed as “the strategic energy ellipse” of the world (as cited by Naji, 2011, p. 155). Iran’s sole distinction of being flanked on either side by two of the major energy basins assigns the country an undeniable status as the land connectivity between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea energy hubs. With a vital geographical disposition and potential as the most viable energy and trade transit route, Iran emerges as one of the most potent regional players. While the contemporary global strategic environments are not very conducive for Iranian regional ambitions, Iran’s leadership has always been desperate to achieve a dominant status that commemorates the nation’s potential.

Iran’s potential to significantly influence the regional strategic dynamics owing to its geographical standing has always been accepted as a reality. Thus historically, most of the Persian rulers have been able to maintain comparative superiority over other states in the region, except when challenged by greater powers. Interestingly, nature has also favored Iran as its landmass takes the shape of a “plateau” formed by the “Zagros and Alborz Mountains” with “The Caspian Sea” towards the northern side and the “Persian Gulf” in the South, transpiring as a “natural chokepoint in Southwest Asia”; essentially, Iranian territory is located astride “transcontinental trade routes” thus “whoever controlled it, held the strategic high ground in the region” (McInnis, 2015, p. 3). The interior Iranian territory has been traditionally inhospitable for the invading forces, allowing the inhabitants a deep sense of pride by assuring the state a unique kind of impregnable sovereignty, thus instilling a distinct national culture.

Proximity with the Energy Rich Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea Regions

Iranian mainland is blessed with an extended “mountainous coastline” in the Persian Gulf, offering it geographic domination of “the Strait of Hormuz, as well as the Gulf of Oman” (McInnis, 2015, p. 4). Tehran’s unquestionable potential of influencing activities in the Persian Gulf and long coastline along the strategically vital Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), indicates its significance in regional trade and transit. The international competition over gaining control of large energy reservoirs in the Persian Gulf region had a decisive impact on the regional geopolitical environments. Valdani (2002) is of the view that the “existing energy resources” have highlighted the commercial importance of the Persian Gulf countries and this aspect is regarded as the “geo-economic factor” (Naji, 2011, p. 166). In sum, Tehran enjoys some degree of influence over the maritime activities in the Persian Gulf and retains “third and second-largest reserves of oil and natural gas in the world” respectively (Mercille, 2008, p 582).

In the prevailing international dynamics, the economic potential of a nation is imperative for preserving its strategic interests besides the military viability, thus making the geographic attributes of space a prominent factor. Iran in this regard assumes a key role along the Eurasian rimland through its geographically dominant location astride northern coastline of the Persian Gulf and the proximity with the Hormuz Strait. Iran’s ambition to dominate the passage through the Strait of Hormuz is aided by the occupation of six islands that are strategically located at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Geographically, Iranian sway over the entire northern coastline of Hormuz strait besides the “military outposts in the islands of Abu Musa, Larak and Sirri” is vital as it “could easily

enable any worthwhile naval power to block the movement of traffic" through the water channel (Bansal, 2012, p. 853).

Dallmayr (1999) has stated that "Hormuz Strait is one of the Rimland keys," as proposed by Nicholas Spykman's renowned geopolitical theory, which brings together several parts of the strategically crucial Rimland (as cited by Naji, 2011, p.167). Iran's geographic disposition places it dominantly astride the entire northern coast of the Persian Gulf, allowing it to maintain surveillance of the maritime activities and thus, emerge as a vital cog of the Rimland. As per the available data, nearly "90 percent of oil exported from the Persian Gulf, transits by tankers through the Strait of Hormuz" (Bansal, 2012, p. 853). In addition to the transit of Middle Eastern oil, Qatar's "Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG)" is also supplied through this passage (Barnes & Jaffe, 2006, p. 153). Tehran's potential of disrupting oil transit through the "Strait of Hormuz" emerges as a viable challenge since it may "lead to a big spurt in the prices of oil and gas," resulting in "a major global economic crisis" (Bansal, 2012, p. 853).

Iran's geographical eminence is further augmented due to its status of being one of the littoral nations of the world's "largest lake, the Caspian Sea," and proximity with Central Asia, the energy-rich but landlocked region (Pak & Farajzadeh, 2007, p. 755). The landlocked Caspian Sea has large energy resources with the region possessing nearly "21.6 percent of oil" and "45.6 percent of natural gas" of the world (Amineh & Houweling, 2007, p. 366). While global strategic dynamics have significantly restricted Iran's potential of benefitting from the Caspian Sea energy, the country retains leverage vis-à-vis transit of hydrocarbon resources from its landlocked neighborhood. Iran has an assured capacity of playing a dominant role in the sustainable supply of the energy, which is "being discovered and developed in the Caspian basin," a development guaranteeing Tehran immense financial rewards (Bonine, 2003, p. 28). Subsequent to the demise of the Soviet Empire, both Beijing, as well as New Delhi, view "Iran as a bridge to the energy-rich Caspian Sea region," an area likely to witness "strategic rivalry among the world's great powers" (Mafinezam & Mehrabi, 2008, p. 80).

Influence on Regional Energy Dynamics

Iran's geographic significance due to its proximity with the strategically vital regions, the presence of huge energy reservoirs, and immense potential as a regional trade and transit hub, subject the country to global intrigues. Notwithstanding international isolation as a result of animosity with the US, especially after the culmination of the cold war, Iran's strategic status owing to its geographic prominence has not diminished. With the renewed global contest in the region for seeking influence over the Caspian Sea hydrocarbon resources, Iran emerges as one of the key players in the regional energy politics. In the evolving energy dynamics of the region, Iranian landmass is geographically vital as the country is not only the "member of the Caspian Sea region," but can also serve as the shortest and most viable transit facility for this energy reservoir "and the free trade world," through its "high seas" and the Persian Gulf seaports (Mesbahi, 2004, p. 110).

The littoral nations of the Persian Gulf rely heavily on the export of energy to the industrialized world, which contributes significantly to the global economy. In this context, the sustainable, secure, and uninterrupted supply of energy, forms approximately 90 percent of the regional export and thus assumes strategic significance. Iran and other Persian Gulf states own "more than 63 percent of the world reserves of crude oil and 40 percent of gas resources," while the "Caspian Sea

basin," states including Iran possess nearly "14.6 percent of the world's total proven oil reserves and approximately 50 percent of the world's total proven natural gas reserves" (Morady, 2011, p. 76). Valdani (2002) suggests that in the 21st century, the "existing energy resources" have enhanced the value of these regions - the potential recognized as the "geo-economic factor" (as cited by Naji, 2011, p. 166). Despite being subject to crippling economic sanctions by the US, Iran has possibly a major role in "China's growing energy interests in the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea regions" (Mafinezam & Mehrabi, 2008, p. 84).

The argument over the "relative importance of political factors and economic forces in shaping policy," in the contemporary world leads to the fact that presumably, the "geo-economics" have gained an edge over all other factors (Mercille, 2008, p. 572). Hence, the commercial potential of the states, especially in the case of those territories which are either energy-rich or and can emerge as a trade link, assume vital significance in global power politics. Iran's significance in the global energy dynamics is enhanced manifold due to its proximity with the Persian Gulf region, which holds approximately "65 percent" of the world's oil and nearly "30 percent" of the natural gas (Morady, 2011). According to Valdani (2002), states of the Persian Gulf have "more than 700 oil wells" and thus recognized as the "the oil-store of the world" (as quoted by Naji, 2011, p. 168). Thus, "the Persian Gulf," has enormous commercial value since it "contains greatest reserves of energy," which is almost "two-thirds of the world's proven oil reserves" (Pollack, 2003, p. 3; Ayoob, 1981).

Iran has a vital role in the region's energy dynamics because historically, the oil was initially discovered on the Iranian soil at the commencement of the 20th Century. The country is not only categorized as one of the main energy-producing nations but it has the unique stature of being geographically located astride vital energy transit routes, both maritime and overland. Consequently, Iran has a unique geographical distinction of being the only territory that has not only the proximity with two of the world's huge energy basins, but it also serves as the only land connectivity between the Persian Gulf region and the Caspian Sea. Whereas Iran can potentially influence maritime energy transit through the Persian Gulf, the country can also play a major part in the overland supply of the Caspian Sea hydrocarbon resources. In the case of the Caspian Sea energy transit, Iranian territory emerges as the shortest, direct, and most viable route for the landlocked region.

It can be conveniently inferred that the availability of massive "energy resources in the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea" regions, persistent escalation of the global demand and the essence of affordability as well as sustainability of supplies, adds to Iranian strategic significance (Klare, 2001; Singh, 2007). Consequently, the "development and export of Caspian oil" offers massive financial incentives to Iran since except Russia, all other coastal states of the Caspian region "lack access to the open ocean," while Tehran offers "the shortest and cheapest route for pipelines" (Bonine, 2003, p. 28). It is thus evident that Iran has the geographic distinction of being one of the most influential players in the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea energy production as well as its transit to the energy-starved regions. While unfavorable global strategic dynamics can limit Iran's capacity in energy politics for the time being, however, with geography being a permanent attribute of a nation, Tehran cannot be denied its due role forever.

The Transit and Trade Potential

The pivotal geographical location of Iran, especially due to shared borders with former Soviet satellite states, presented it as an ideal opportunity to emerge as regional transit and trade hub. In the contemporary global dynamics where economic interests have somewhat preceded other aspects of national interests, Iran's commercial potential is regarded as vital not only for the region but the entire Eurasia. The precious geographical location, fall of a global hegemon from Iranian proximity after the "Cold War," besides the "emergence of" energy-rich sovereign nations in the "Caspian basin," provided Tehran an ideal opportunity to emerge as a commanding nation, "compared to the other regional states" (Morady, 2011, p. 84). With the end of nine years long Iran-Iraq war and disintegration of the Soviet Union coinciding, Tehran anticipated reasonably vast strategic space for itself in the region. Notwithstanding American opposition, Tehran seeks "closer economic ties with the South Caucasus," has been aspiring growth in "trade with Central Asia" and invested in the development of trans-national land connectivity in the region and beyond (Starr, 2001, p. 75).

Since the post-Soviet era world focused on pursuing "economic interests," Iran started projecting itself as the most feasible "transport and energy hub," offering connectivity between "Europe and Russia with India, and Central Asia with the Arabian world" (Walter, 2014, p. 72). Iranian leadership embarked upon attaining the national objective of assuming pivotal role in the regional trade, including the transit of landlocked Caspian Sea hydrocarbon resources. Iran's ambition to pursue its commercial interests was comprehensible as the long war with Iraq and international isolation after the Islamic revolution had devastated its economy. With exceptionally favorable geography, Iran aspired to a lead role in the regional connectivity and opted to enhance its transit potential. Accordingly, Iran opted to develop International North-South Trade Corridor (INSTC) in 2000 with Indian financial assistance, a project conceived as the transit link of "goods through Iran and the Caspian Sea to Russia and Northern Europe" (Singh & Lele, 2010, p. 95).

Tehran's quest for emerging as regional transit and trade pivot through INSTC entailed the development of several connectivity projects from its soil including roads, railways, and energy pipelines. Iran, thus, aspired to link its "Chabahar Port" with energy-rich Caspian basin nations of "Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan" (Morady, 2011, p. 76). Iranian plan to develop and expand transit facilities at Chabahar Port seemed a major commercial venture since the facility along the Persian Gulf coastline offered an outlet to the landlocked Central Asia-Caucasus regions. With the viability of another southward alternative to sea through Gwadar port of Pakistan reliant on peace in violence-hit Afghanistan, INSTC and Chabahar appeared as the most preferred option. While geographically Iran emerged as the "most logical and economical export route" for the Caspian Sea energy, however, the country was omitted as the transit route since pipelines could raise "dependence on the volatile Persian Gulf region," while additionally, it might elevate Tehran's strategic standing (Hunter, 2010, p. 163).

The possibility of Iran emerging as the main transit route for the export of landlocked Caspian energy resources appeared as a huge financial incentive for the cash-starved Iranian economy, provided Tehran manages stabilization of relationship with the US. Iran is aware of the essence of removing irritants in its relationship with the US as persistent animosity with the global hegemon is comparatively far more damaging for Tehran. Some of the aspects that can help Iran in the normalization of its strategic equation with the US for a greater role in the energy politics may

include: Iranian potential as “a low-cost producer” owing to its geography; prospects of Western inclination towards the “diversification of Caspian energy production and transport routes” in addition to the Gulf; attractive proposition of the “pipelines to the Black or Mediterranean Sea for those seeking to market Caspian oil in Europe”; and “trade with and through Iran in non-energy goods and services would develop faster if Iranian economy improves” (Starr, 2001, p. 76).

INFLUENCE OF GEOGRAPHY ON IRAN'S STRATEGIC POSTURE

Evolution of Iran's Strategic Culture

Iran's “national consciousness” has diverse traits, shaped by “its longevity and resilience as a nation” and strong bonds with a proud “civilization,” always persuading Iranians to regain ancient “relative power” (McInnis, 2015, p. v). The geographical status of Iran accords it numerous incentives in Eurasia, identifying it a “strategically vital” territory in the region since its landmass serves as the “geographic corridor” connecting “Europe, Africa, South Asia, and southeast Asia” (Morady, 2011, p. 75). Moreover, the attraction of Iran's Persian culture permeated transnational following including “Iraq, Turkey, countries of the Caucasus and trans-Caucasus region, the Middle East, Afghanistan, the Central Asian Republics, China and South Asia” (Bansal, 2012, p. 849). While geographically, Iran is “inseparable from the Caucasus and Central Asia,” various dialects of “Persian has been spoken and written all along the ancient Silk Road,” thus offering Tehran some strategic leverages and receptivity due to commonality of language (Starr, 2001, p. 76).

Iran has historically been maintaining diversified national interests, which are shaped by the realistic appreciation of the country's geopolitical, strategic, and commercial potential based on its geography. Iran's geographical eminence is ratified as it has “land borders” with seven countries “(Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, and Iraq)”; there are six littoral states of “the Persian Gulf” besides Iran, “(Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Oman)”, while the country shares Sea borders with two of the Caspian Sea states “Kazakhstan and Russia” (Bonine, 2003, p. 21). Iran's “vast geography and ancient glorious history” instills a deeply engraved conceit and a “sense of cultural superiority” in the Iranians, “which they trace back to the sixth century BC when Cyrus the Great founded the Achaemenid Empire” (Marschall, 2003, p-4). Iran thus maintains strong bondage with ancient Persian identity, while its post-revolutionary Islamic ideological orientation has introduced a strong Shia identity, further strengthening national culture of resilience.

Iran as a nation considers itself the rightful hegemon of “the Gulf sub region,” owing to its cherished history and exclusive geography; Iranians project themselves as “one of only few selected states, which by virtue of being an ancient and territorially established civilization (based around the notion of Iran-zamin) can and should influence beyond its borders” (Ehteshami, 2002, p. 284). Geographically, the long coastal line along the strategically vital Persian Gulf projects Iran's stature as the major player and reinforces “Iranian belief that the Gulf is a Persian lake,” where the country is the “main littoral power since the time of Achaemenid hegemony over the Middle East” (Marschall, 2003, p. 5). Thus, Iran's key geographical disposition concerning the Islamic world and ancient Persian legacy grants it significant cultural, ethnolinguistic, and religious clout in the region. Throughout history, Tehran has concurrently employed its ethnic, cultural, and religious influences for strategic gains with reasonable success.

Impact of Geography on Iran's Strategic Culture

Iranian geography has shaped the country's "political destiny" as its location "astride the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea," which is being flanked by "the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia, and proximity with Russia," keeps Iran under the global attention (Hunter, 2010, p. 19). Shah led Iran aspired a "role beyond the Middle East geographically," seeking to establish the country as a maritime power to ensure the "security of the Indian Ocean basin," but the strategic limitations of the revolutionary regime compelled Tehran to gradually moderate ambitions to "the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea and not the greater Middle East" (Katouzian & Shahidi, 2007, p. 153). Marschall (2003) quotes Davoud Bavand as under:

It is Iran's natural mission to have the dominant position in the Persian Gulf. Besides its long history and the importance of political and military power during the Shah's era, Iran is a big country with a large population and a major coastal power. Its shores span half the Persian Gulf [c. 1,050 miles], Iran has numerous islands, and is an exclusive economic zone (p. 4).

Iranian territory is located in one of the geographically most vital regions of the world, and the country "sits on some of the most valuable mineral resources" found anywhere (William, 2005, p. 189). Iran is regarded "among those countries" where the "overall evolution" process of the nation has been intensely "affected" due to "its geographical location" (Hunter, 2010, p. 17). The attributes of the geographic location have played a decisive part in shaping Iran's strategic posture for centuries, notwithstanding the country's domestic political environments or its external alignment. Geography has on one hand "facilitated the spread of Persian influence in Asia," while on the other, subjected "Iran to great power rivalries" as well as diplomatic intrigues of the extra-regional players (Ehteshami, 2002, p. 284). Iran continues to be strategically vital as it is "quintessential buffer state standing between" the newly independent countries in the former Soviet space and the oil-rich territories of "the Persian Gulf; between Europeanized Turkey and the nations of Asia; straddling the principal route for the world's principal energy resource-oil" (William, 2005, p. 70).

During the cold war era, Iran occupied a geographically key location along the border with the former Soviet Empire and aligned itself with the US-led anti-Communism alliance in the region. During the cold war rivalry between the US and USSR led alliances, Tehran was considered one of the most trusted partners of the anti-communist alignment and played a vital role in restricting Soviet expansionist ambitions in the region. Iran has been the main "bulwark of the West," actively participating in the execution of the "Northern Tier" strategy against the Soviet Union and was regarded as the "dependable guardian (and source) of Persian Gulf oil" by the American led alliance (Bonine, 2003, p. 21). However, after the fall of the USSR, certain patterns have emerged in Iranian strategic posture in the region, suggesting Tehran's reorientation towards Russia, the largest and most powerful successor state located in former Soviet space. Due to the geographical proximity, Iran has been strategically anxious about the potential "remilitarization of the Caspian" and concerned with "supply of the US patrol boats to Kazakhstan, the expansion of Russian naval facilities at Astrakhan and NATO's Partnership for Peace exercises that include small Central Asian units" (Starr, 2001, p. 74).

Besides being a country possessing huge hydrocarbon resources, "Iran is a key player in the competition over pipeline routes because its Gulf ports offer the shortest pipeline routes from the

Caspian Basin to the Indian Ocean" (Starr, 2001, p. 75). With the international economic sanction regime seriously curtailing Iranian commercial potential, Tehran is likely to continue its resistance against all energy supply projects through the region, which may undermine its legitimate interests. Iran's rulers have always anticipated and aspired to a "preeminent, even hegemonic, role in the Middle Eastern political and security affairs," and sought "maximum freedom to act in its surrounding region" (McInnis, 2015, p. 4). Hence, Iranian presumption of being a dominant regional power is linked with the pre-revolutionary Shah era when the country was recognized as "the only powerful nation-state in the region based on geopolitics," since "Iran is a vast country with a long coastline and a location which has always been important strategically for outside powers" (Marschall, 2003, p. 10).

Iran's quest for a dominant regional role was seriously hampered with the strategic developments after the ouster of the Shah regime by the clergy led the Islamic revolution. There were serious apprehensions regionally as well as globally regarding the motives of the revolutionary rulers - especially "from the early attempts to spread the Islamic (Shia) revolution beyond the country's borders" (Bonine, 2003, p. 22). Notwithstanding a focal status in the Islamic world religiously, Iran's sectarian outlook and intention to export Shia ideology in the early days of revolution caused many concerns among the Sunni majority neighborhood. In a way, the religion has presumably been some kind of a "divisive factor" in the region as the majority of the "Central Asians are nearly all Sunnis except Azerbaijan" and thus maintain "no affinity or loyalty to Iran's Asna-Ashari Shia faith" (Starr, 2001, p. 77). Whereas Central Asian- Caucasus population being mostly averse to religion due to a prolonged rule of godless communists, they are "as much repelled by the extremes of Iranian theocracy as they are by the so-called Wahhabi threat from Sunni fundamentalists" (Starr, 2001, p. 77).

The revolutionary Tehran maintained a religiously firm identity and aspired to a patronizing role for the entire Shia sect residing all over the world. Iranian strategic culture was thus decisively influenced by the revolutionary mindset and staunch ideological connection with Shia theocracy. The clergy-led Iran was admired by the Shia follower's world over, and their religious affiliation with the sacred city of Qom allowed Tehran "to draw upon their support, cutting across national frontiers, thus enhancing its significance considerably" (Bansal, 2012, p. 850). While some of the Sunni majority states in the region have been apprehensive of Shia revolutionary Iran, the post-Khomeini leadership at Tehran has been conscious of this factor and tried to play down the earlier ideological rhetoric. It would be hard to assume that even the "conservative Iranian leaders" would support "political radicalization of the region along religious lines," due to growing concerns about Tehran's Shia theocratic outlook (Starr, 2001, p. 77). Factually, Iranian leaders have displayed a visible inclination towards pragmatism and are unlikely to abandon the nation's strategic objectives on the dictates of religious ideology.

CONCLUSION

"Geography offers physical playing field for those designing as well as executing strategy;" it "drives, certain shapes, the technological options dominating tactics, logistics, institutions, and military cultures;" and finally it functions "as inspiration for the grand narrative of high theory that appears as the common understanding of geopolitics" (Gray, Sloan, G., & Sloan, G. R., 1999, p. 165). One of the leading geographers of all times, ~~Halford~~ Halford Mackinder, the Heartland theory fame"

is of the view that the “geographical quantities in the calculation are more measurable and more nearly constant than the human” (Kaplan, 2009, p. 100). Morgenthau (1960) believes that the “geographical location of a state” can be regarded as “the most stable factor of countries’ power.” Iran as a nation has successfully managed to preserve its regional significance despite being confronted with diversifying global strategic dynamics. Iranian geography contributes to enhancing the country’s strategic significance in three ways: location astride commercially vital the Persian Gulf; territory which links important regions; and finally, the capacity of dominating the Hormuz Strait.

According to the accepted norms, “great powers” tend to be “wary of middle powers,” particularly when they are occupying a “strategically sensitive” territory; Iran, undoubtedly, is regarded as such a country (Hunter, 2010 p. 127). Historically, Iran’s geography has subjected the country to numerous challenges including the “need to secure its territorial integrity;” avoid recurrence of “adverse historical experiences;” ancient contest with neighboring empires; interference by external players in the country’s “internal affairs;” and concerns to its “resource endowment” (Ehteshami, 2002, p. 284). Iran can be categorized as a “potential middle power,” occupying space “in a geopolitically sensitive region,” which is the focus of dominant global actors, this country’s “political destiny, foreign policy” options, and level of sovereignty is considerably influenced by “systemic factors” (Hunter, 2010, p. x). Hence, post-revolutionary Iran’s strategic orientation, which placed the country diagonally opposite to American interests in the region and continual animosity with the global hegemon. seriously undermined its geographical potential.

In sum, strategic interests influencing contemporary Iran’s strategic posture include: avoiding “international isolation” amid American animosity; ensuring “security of its borders, which implies a need for stability” in the neighborhood; building cordial relations in the region; continuing “close relations with Russia, professional engagement with Turkey” while developing relationship with “Azerbaijan at some point;” “containing rise of anti-Shi’a Sunni influence;” “balancing Pakistani, Saudi Arabian and potentially Uzbekistan’s presence in the region;” maintaining energy security interests; undertaking efforts to limit American attempts against Iranian economy; and “improving relations with the EU, China, and Japan” (Starr, 2001, pp. 73-74). However, post-revolutionary Iran’s failed ambitions despite the country’s geographic potential, historical linkage with the Persian legacy, and proactive role as the custodian of Shia Islam has largely shaped Iranian strategic posture, which essentially opts for continued resistance.

References

- Amineh, M. P., & Houweling, H. (2007). Global energy security and its geopolitical impediments—the case of the Caspian region. *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, 6(1), 365-88.
- Ayoob, M. (Ed.). (2014). *The Middle East in World Politics (Routledge Revivals)*. Routledge.
- Bansal, A. (2012). Iran: Its Strategic Importance. *Strategic Analysis*, 36(6), 848-58.
- Barnes, J., & Jaffe, A. M. (2006). The Persian Gulf and the geopolitics of oil. *Survival*, 48(1), 143-62.
- Blank, S. (2003). Central Asia and the transformation of Asia's strategic geography. *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, 17(2), 318-351.
- Bonine, M. (2003). Iran: The Pivotal State of Southwest Asia. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 44(1), 1-39.

- Cohen, S. B. (2003). *Geopolitics of the world system*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cohen, S. B. (2014). *Geopolitics: The geography of international relations*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Ehteshami, A. (2002). *The foreign policy of Iran*. Lynne Rienner. Retrieved from <http://dro.dur.ac.uk/4169/1/4169.pdf>.
- Gray, C. S. (1991). Geography and grand strategy. *Comparative Strategy*, 10(4), 311-29.
- Gray, C. S., Sloan, G., & Sloan, G. R. (Eds.). (1999). *Geopolitics, geography, and strategy*. Psychology Press.
- Hunter, S. (2010). *Iran's foreign policy in the post-Soviet era: resisting the new international order*. ABC-CLIO.
- Kaplan, R. D. (2009). The revenge of geography. *Foreign Policy*, (172), 96-105.
- Katouzian, H., & Shahidi, H. (Eds.). (2007). *Iran in the 21st Century: Politics, Economics & Conflict* (Vol. 4). Routledge.
- Kile, S. N. (Ed.). (2005). *Europe and Iran: perspectives on non-proliferation* (No. 21). Oxford University Press.
- Klare, M. T. (2001). The new geography of conflict. *Foreign Affairs*, 49-61.
- Mafinezam, A., & Mehrabi, A. (2008). *Iran and its place among nations*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Marschall, C. (2003). *Iran's Persian Gulf Policy: From Khomeini to Khatami*. Routledge.
- Mayborn, W. C. (2014). The Pivot to Asia: The Persistent Logics of Geopolitics and the Rise of China. *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 15(4), 76-101.
- McInnis, J. M. (2015, May 12). Iran's strategic thinking: Origins and evolution. *American Enterprise Institute*.
- Mercille, J. (2008). The radical geopolitics of US foreign policy: Geopolitical and geo-economics logics of power. *Political Geography*, 27(5), 570-86.
- Mesbahi, M. (2004). Iran and Central Asia: paradigm and policy. *Central Asian Survey*, 23(2), 109-39.
- Morady, F. (2011). Iran ambitious for regional supremacy: The great powers, geopolitics and energy resources. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 7(1), 75-94.
- Morgenthau, H. J. (1960). *Power among Nations: The struggle for power and peace*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Murray, W., Knox, M., & Bernstein, A. (Eds.). (1996). *The making of strategy: rulers, states, and war*. Cambridge University Press.
- Naji, S. (2011). Iran, the center of 'strategic energy ellipse': A geopolitical reality. *Geopolitics, History and International Relations*, 3(1), 155.
- Owens, M. T. (1999). In defense of classical geopolitics. *Naval War College Review*, 52(4), 59-76.
- Pak, A., & Farajzadeh, M. (2007). Iran's integrated coastal management plan: Persian Gulf, Oman Sea, and southern Caspian Sea coastlines. *Ocean & Coastal Management*, 50(9), 754-73.
- Pollack, K. M. (2005). *The Persian puzzle: The conflict between Iran and America*. Random House Incorporated.
- Razvi, M. (1982). Pakistan's geopolitical environment and security. *Pakistan Horizon*, 35(3), 29-43.
- Scott, M., & Alcenat, W. (2008). Revisiting the pivot: The Influence of heartland theory in great power politics. *Comparative Strategy*, 22, 109-29.
- Sempa, F. (2017). *Geopolitics: from the Cold War to the 21st Century*. Routledge.

- Singh Roy, M., & Lele, A. (2010). Engaging Iran in the new strategic environment: Opportunities and challenges for India. *Strategic Analysis*, 35(1), 88-105.
- Singh, K. R. (2007). Energy insecurity and military misadventures in the Persian Gulf region. *International Studies*, 44(4), 283-304.
- Spykman, N. J. (1938). Geography and foreign policy, I. *American Political Science Review*, 32(1), 28-50.
- Starr, C. F. S. F. (2001). Strategic assessment of Central Eurasia. *Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council*. Retrieved from https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2001/01/0101-Strategic_Assessment_Central_Eurasia.pdf.
- Valdani, A. J. (2002). *New geopolitics of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf*. Tehran: Foreign Ministry of Iran.
- Venetis, E. (2011). *The Rising power of Iran in the Middle East: Forming an axis with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon*. (Working Paper No. 21). Athens: Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy.
- Walter, P. (2014). The Persian pivot? Iran's emerging regional role.
- William, B. (2005). "The Great Satan" vs. "The Mad Mullahs": How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other.
- Yarger, H. R. (2006, Jun.). Towards a theory of strategy: Art Lykke and the army war college strategy model. *US Army War College Guide to National Security Policy and Strategy*, 107-13. Retrieved from <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a444141.pdf>.