
Strategic Competition in the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The conflicting security due to different kinds of national interests and policy objectives of regional and global scales has brought a sustainable political challenge of world class. This paper reviews strategic competitions in the two critical and risk laden regions in the world. It is clarified Iran and China -as pivotal regional actors- reactions in response to the United States military presence in the Persian Gulf and South China Sea. It is explained and comprised the strategic competition of the political players in the regions.

Keywords: *alliances, maritime security, military presence, political economy, political behavior*

• **Introduction**

The Persian Gulf and South China Sea are most strategically important in sea carries and global maritime trade which significant contribution to the world political economy. In Persian Gulf the Strait of Hormuz is one of the narrowest choke points in sea carries located between Iran and Oman. It is a channel linking the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman. The strait provides sea passageways to Arabian Sea connecting with Indian Ocean that links to South China Sea. The South China Sea plays a significant role in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific and thus main corridor between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The geopolitics of the regions is a significant contribution to the establishment of US military bases in the country alliances in the Arab States of Persian Gulf and Southeast Asian Nations. Consequently, these waterways are two vital shipping lanes in the global maritime trade and international political economy.

• **The Persian Gulf**

According to U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), more than 17 billion barrels of oil passed out through the Hormuz Strait per day. The EIA estimated that more than 85 percent of the crude oil that moved through this choke point went to Asian markets ¹. It is a geographic choke point and a main artery for the transport of oil from the Middle East. The US imports relatively little of the oil from the Strait of Hormuz, but two Americans alliances in Asia-Pacific such South Korea and Japan depended the imports of crude oil. There are also two biggest oil importers such China and India which heavily dependent on Persian Gulf oil which passes through the Strait of Hormuz.

Post-Persian Gulf Wars (2003), the United States' strategy is remained to ensure energy security and stability of Arabs government in the Persian Gulf Region and the long-term security of Israel as an unswerving strategy in the Middle East. The US relationship in the region are pragmatically based on shared security and economic concerns. It also has strong military, security, intelligence, and diplomatic ties with several Middle Eastern nations, including Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) ². The Council leaders arranged to meet annually in this format to review progress made on all

the initiatives agreed upon during the Summit and to look for further ways to strengthen GCC-US strategic partnership³.

In Arab states of the Persian Gulf, the main driver of defense policy is the Iranian military threat combined with internal security challenges². Despite massive arms deal by Saudi Arabia and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab states have continued to rely on the security umbrella of the United States. The Center for Strategic and International Studies stated that the United States faces major challenges in dealing with Iran, the threat of terrorism, and the tide of political instability in the Arabian Peninsula. The presence of some of the world's largest reserves of oil and natural gas, vital shipping lanes, and Shia populations throughout the region have made the peninsula the focal point of the U.S. and Iranian strategic competition⁴.

Over the past two decades, Iran strives to expand naval forces and missile capabilities simultaneous, in countering regional and trans-regional forces of different existential threats such United States and Israel. Iran has accumulated a largest ballistic missile arsenal and a robust collection of cruise missiles as well as a sizable fleet of relatively small, high speed and highly-maneuverable attack craft in the Persian Gulf. It is making a push to redress a key remaining shortfall in its ability to deny or degrade U.S. power projection capabilities in the Persian Gulf⁵. Americans military presence in the Persian Gulf not only as a security threat for Iran, but also as a trans-regional forces against Iran's regional goals in the Middle East. Furthermore, the Persian Gulf and particularly the Strait of Hormuz serves Iran as a political tool to bargain with major world powers, especially the United States⁶.

Thus, the United States strategy in the Persian Gulf were was maritime security through the Gulf as well as to stop further Iranian regional expansion by military supports of the Arab States in the region. The strategy also supported of the consolidation of the Jewish settler state in Palestine over the past few decades. Nevertheless, most of the Persian Gulf States' political trends concern around tensions between democratization, political legitimacy, and Islamist extremist groups besides long term Arab - Israel peace projects which remained in the Middle East.

- **The South and East China Sea**

The South China Sea is one such essential waterway for the United States and an estimate shows at least 30 percent of the world's maritime trade transits, including approximately \$1.2 trillion in ship-borne trade bound through the sea for the US annually⁷.

The United States strategy in Asia-Pacific designed to achieve a long-term economic and maritime security interests in South China Sea as a part of their grand strategy. To achieve the goals, the U.S. established monitor strategy that can be supported by navigation program and multilateral coalition under the uncertainty conditions in the region⁸. The freedom of navigation program to preserve national interests by US navy near the artificial islands in South China Sea, repeatedly warned by Chinese army to stay away from the zone. Although the U.S. Navy preference followed by international legal norms in the waterway. Nevertheless, the result of the program with collaborative efforts by territorial claimants as well as the encouraging military rebalance did not assets to obtain tangible outcomes.

Chinese provocative behavior with a cautious strategy drive by maritime capabilities which increasingly developed more dominate in the world's maritime trade transits in the South China Sea over the past two decades⁹. It is a part of their grand strategy to expand territorial seas and strategy implementation that support greater access to marine resources. Modernizations armed forces and increasing military expenditure of China has resulted of naval expansionism and building artificial islands - not forbidden by international law- and military bases in the isles which developed tensions towards a regionally order in the region. The consequence of China military rises also has brought an acceleration of a regional arms

race in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, low economic growth, traditional sea-denial approach, size of armed forces, geopolitics and socio-political tensions in the most of countries resulted of China undisputed sovereignty over the region.

Strategic competition between China and the United States as two major political and economic powers in Asia-Pacific, and alongside rapid military expansion in Southeast Asia indicates the importance of the region in world politics. The conflicting security due to different kinds of national and economic interests of regional and global scale have brought a maritime disputes and resource conflicts in the crucial area that emerged tensions in the South China Sea. Americans' Long-term monitor strategy for South China Sea replied by cautious strategy that adopted by China in the said region.

Japanese strategy towards proactive peace diplomacy in the South China Sea and it is a regional reaction to Chinese strategy as a major regional competitor¹². Nevertheless, political difficulties in Japan such constitutional restraints in right of collective self-defense and budget constraints in military expansion as well as low profile in foreign policy, proved to be incapable of constructively influencing the reduction of tension in the region which towards the peace diplomacy. Furthermore, Japan is surrounded by three longstanding nuclear powers such China, Russia and North Korea and it must continue to rely on the security umbrella of the United States. So, the multiple claimants seek to address and resolve their issues peacefully due to the facts. Thus, military expansion and geographical location allowed Chinese attempts to dominate the South China Sea and extend permanent military presence further in proximity to the Southeast Asia.

The escalating tensions between the United States and North Korea after carrying out the new missile test, hence the U.S. naval strike group deployed towards the western Pacific. North Korea also steady developed the nuclear forces raises and continuing missile testing, oblivious to international economic sanctions and warnings from the United States and China. Pyongyang's goals is to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile that can strike the US mainland thus will continue until achieves this military ambitions. It is an ultimate goal for the regime. Americans' Long-term nuclear diplomacy and the international economic sanctions did not work and keeping of Pyongyang's political behavior. In North Korea, propaganda and brainwash is a strategy in order to change public opinion also needed enemies that helped to justify the repression of the mass of people. Thus, the nuclear proliferation strategy towards a crippling political crisis in the East China Sea developed tensions on the Korean Peninsula and it is increasingly growing to date¹³.

The multilateral talks for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, international sanctions and the policy of strategic patience towards North Korea did not conduct Pyongyang to stop nuclear program, and ballistic missile testing is continued, so far¹⁴. In response to North Korea's missile tests, US military tested an anti-missile system to intercept an incoming intercontinental ballistic missile. As experts, it is capable, credible deterrent against a very real threat vitally important to the defense of homeland¹⁵. It is a reaction to ballistic missile testing by Pyongyang, toward a possibly strike on the Americans alliances in Asia-Pacific South Korea, Japan as well as US mainland and thus to protect the United States and the allies from North Korean threat.

In 2015, the United States in line with pivot to Asia strategy, pushed forward with the initiative the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) that expanded to twelve countries, including Japan but excluding China. The twelve parties reached a final agreement in October 2015, but the deal was never ratified by the U.S. Congress. Although Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the 12-nation free-trade deal orchestrated 11. In the Southeast Asia, most of the countries' political trends concern around tensions between democratization, corruption, and terrorism.

- **Discussions**

In order to formulate a grand strategy, one should have clarity about national interests and policy objectives, and plans for achieving them. The national interests often referred as either strategic national interests in security, prosperity and stability, or ideological national interests in the promotion of popular government and human rights¹⁶.

Post-Cold War, US strategy designed, towards the presence and possibility military interventions in two main strategic national interests in the world; the Middle East and Southeast Asia regions by mean of the simultaneous independence and interdependence of different existential threats, as future global conflicts. The strategy effort to strengthen American alliances related to stop further regional expansions of China in Southeast Asia and Iran in the Middle East as two pivotal regional actors as well as Nuclear Disarmament North Korea in the Peninsula. US strategy in the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia supported by establishment of military bases, navigation program and multilateral coalition as complementary strategy under the uncertainty conditions in the two vital and critical regions. The primary goals of the US strategy is achieving for maritime security and freedom of commercial vessels to transit through the two international waterways in the Persian Gulf and South China Sea. It also support stability of United States' alliances in internal challenges and external threats in the Middle East and encouraging military rebalance in Southeast Asia. The US military presence efforts to address current issues such long-term economic and maritime security interests and policy objectives as an unswerving purpose of US grand strategy to achieve their goals. It is also attempting to monitor the regional pivotal military activities and their policy objectives in the said regions.

The United States also needs China to help control and pushing Pyongyang through to change nuclear policy that neutralized without a war, but it was impossible, yet. A preemptive strike on North Korea's nuclear facilities and missile sites brings radioactive places and uncontrollable situation; it is not a moral option to disable nuclear facilities. Technological neutralization could be a better choice of the problem solving, it is doubtful whether the United States will be able to deactivate. Economic sanctions can be used in the future as an instrument of American foreign policy in the strategic competition against Chinese and Iranian Banking System or international transportation, and such companies based on historical record in the world political challenges. Therefore, an economic war is on the way of sanctions as US strategy for the pivotal regional actors, one by one or all together, possibly.

- **Concluding Remarks**

The conflicting security has resulted of different kinds of national interests and thus brought strategic competitions through the international waterways as main sea corridors from the Persian Gulf to South China Sea which continues in the Western and Central Pacific. The common goals of the United States in the Persian Gulf and China Sea are maritime security through the two international waterways. The US new strategy is an effort to strengthen alliances and partnership in the states to a common security vision for the future. The vision does encourage military rebalance of United States' alliances in the Arab States of Persian Gulf and Southeast Asian Nations as well as obligation to defend Japan and South Korea in East Asia. In addition, a comprehensive policy action is urgently needed for a permanent solution of the tension in the Korean Peninsula, otherwise a military conflict is inevitable. Nevertheless, the rebalancing strategy was ineffective and did not assets to obtain tangible outcomes to curb further Chinese and Iranian regional expansions and sovereignty over the regions, so far. Due to various reasons and different kinds of strategic national interests in security, America has not been able to change the political behavior of the regional powers.

As mentioned, regional instability and disorder or military intervention in the said regions has implication for each other and it is a significant contribution to the global economy. Sanction is most likely option as an instrument of American foreign policy. Otherwise, there would not be many good options to resolve the North Korea's threat, war is the only way to end the Korean peninsula crisis.

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