

common agreement in favor of a compromise and implementing it. Local elites are torn by contradictions due to the backwardness of civil society, passivity, fragmentation of the population in conditions of dual power. At the same time, components of the political superstructure borrowed from the West, such as elected institutions, a multi-party system, etc., do not rely on the mature basis of an autochthonous society, where religious and tribal thinking, traditions and norms of the mentioned society are dominant.

Author of the abstract – Elena Dmitrieva

THOMAS FLICHY DE LA NEUVILLE. PERSIAN GULF, TOWARDS A COMPLEXIFICATION OF THE GEOPOLITICAL GAMES OF INFLUENCE // *English version of the article was submitted by the author for the bulletin "Russia and the Moslem World."*

DOI: 10.31249/rmw/2019.04.06

Thomas Flichy de La Neuville,
Professor of International Relations,
University of Paris IV – Sorbonne, France

The current tensions in the Persian Gulf deserve to be interpreted in the light of a recent geopolitical change: the traditional divide separating Saudi Arabia from its Iranian opponent has been scrambled by the apparition of a third force of opportunist neutrals in the region. In a gulf covering an area of 251 000 square kilometres, the power games of the coastal states as those of distant powers are becoming more complex. The situation of the Fifth Fleet could be compared to that of the Portuguese Navy during the mid-seventeenth century, or of the Royal Navy after the Second World War, at a time when the exclusive control of the Persian Gulf, had been replaced by a new balance of naval influences. The salty waters of the Gulf have long been a thermometer of power. The assumption of a closure

of the Strait of Hormuz, which would deprive Western countries from 25% of their daily energy consumption, is however unlikely. This eventuality nevertheless justifies the sale of material or sophisticated vehicles to all states of the region. As US energy dependency declines and US attention sharply turns towards the Pacific, Iran pragmatically assesses the rise of competing regional navies, hoping that more distant actors will one day change the geopolitics of the Gulf to its benefit.

THE UNITED STATES AT THE ORIGINS OF A NAVAL RECOMPOSITION

A structuring geopolitical Iran – Saudi Arabia opposition

In the waters of the Persian Gulf, the main divide separates Saudi Arabia backed by the U.S. and European navies from Iran backed by its Russian and Chinese allies. The first group prevails over the latter because of the presence of the Fifth US fleet, which disposes of two nuclear aircraft carriers in order to monitor the Gulf waters. Saudi Arabia is trying to compensate its lack of naval history and its difficulties to train naval officers, by the purchase of very sophisticated ships. For its part, Iran buys corvettes to China and mines to Russia. The competition between these two powers brings about naval tensions, for example in Bahrain – pivot of the American presence in the Persian Gulf – but where 65% of the population is Shia. For all Gulf powers, the strait of Ormuz is a strategic space: 20% of the world's oil production passes through this point of strangulation. If it was blocked, the price of a barrel of oil could increase by 50% within a few days. The strait is divided into two channels of 3.2 km in order to avoid any risk of collision.

American energy independence at the origins of disengagement

Until 2010, the geopolitics of energy were based on the following assumptions: oil and gas suppliers had limited reserves that would be insufficient in the future to meet increasing global demand. Importers therefore had to establish close links with their suppliers while securing the maritime communication lines connecting them to their suppliers. These postulates have shattered due to a double evolution: the exploitation of shale gas by hydraulic fracturing and the desire to limit global warming. In the future, oil will not necessarily be the largest source of energy, the majority of its consumers will not be Westerners, as for energy reserves, they will not be indefinitely located in the Middle East. In 2017, the United States rose to world rank for the production of oil (13% of the world total), side by side with Saudi Arabia and Russia but also ranked first worldwide for the production of natural gas (20% of the global total). The U.S. energy dependence rate declined from 30.1% in 2005 to 7.7% in 2017 thanks to a drop in consumption resulting from the 2008 crisis and the increase of oil and natural gas production made possible by the development of hydraulic fracturing techniques. The idea of an american energy independence has brought about the hypothesis of a withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East to the benefit of Asia Pacific. Having become self-sufficient, the United States would no longer have to devote itself to the costly preservation of Middle East. They are also thinking of cheaper means of monitoring this maritime area, for example via the use of robots: in effect a fleet of 12 autonomous mini-submarines would be able to cover the entire Persian Gulf. Faced with economic weakening, the oil monarchies multiply the free zones in order to anticipate the post-oil era.

The weakening of US positions in the Gulf

The Persian Gulf is now an area of lesser strategic importance for the United States. Since 2011, frictions between the United States and its partners have multiplied, a sign of mutual distrust. At the beginning of the Arab Spring, in 2011, Saudi leaders had asked the United States to support Hosni Mubarak. The U.S. administration took the opposite side by supporting the opposition and then asking Mubarak to resign. Later, King Abdullah was frightened by the support given by the United States to the opposition in Bahrain. Iran took advantage of these events to spread the idea that U.S. policy was purely utilitarian in the region and that a leader who was no longer useful to the U.S. could quickly disappear. This alarmed the monarchies of the gulf. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, the United States promised to strengthen ties with the Gulf monarchies, but at the same time their attention shifted away from the region to Asia-Pacific. The Gulf monarchies feared an American-Iranian agreement to their detriment. That is why the King of Arabia refused on May 11, 2015 to attend a summit organized by Barack Obama and other leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council to discuss the nuclear deal with Iran. In the early months of the Trump presidency, Gulf monarchies feared a unilateral US withdrawal from the region. That's why they turned to other safe partners. India and China had already moved closer to them since the 2017 embargo on Qatar. In 2010, China set up the China-Gulf Cooperation Council Strategic Dialogue. For their part, France and Great Britain strengthened their military presence in the region in order to take advantage of the desire of oil monarchies to diversify. For its part, Russia had taken advantage of the quasi-embargo imposed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain on Qatar to get closer to this state. By announcing, on December 26, 2018, that the United States could no longer be the world's gendarmes and that

American interventions in the 21st century had been disasters, Donald Trump created a shock in the region.

THE ADVENT OF MULTILATERALISM IN THE PERSIAN GULF

The pragmatism of the Gulf monarchies

Among the different Gulf monarchies, two countries are characterized by their pragmatism. The first is the Sultanate of Oman, a country at the interface of the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, East Africa and India, which has signed a free trade agreement with the United States in 2009 while maintaining excellent relations with Iran. This allows him to act as a diplomatic intermediary between the two geopolitical opponents. For its part, Qatar, which shares reserves of gas with Iran, has been subject to a virtual embargo since it distanced itself from Saudi Arabia in May 2017. Following the blockade, the emirate completely revised its foreign policy. This state is at the mercy of any potential confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is officially protected by the U.S.VIIIth Fleet. This is the reason why Russia remains very discreet. As for China, it signed on 27 September 2017 an agreement aimed at fighting against terrorism in order to buy the services of a partner able to cool down its own secessionist Islamists. Qatar has moved closer to Iran but also to Turkey, which has installed a permanent military base in the country. About 8000 Turks live in Qatar. More than 200 Turkish companies are present in the Emirate. Qatar is discreetly supported by Kuwait which proposed a mediation between the latter and Saudi Arabia in 2017. The embargo set up around Qatar in June 2017 reveals the weaknesses of Arab solidarity and stimulates new alliances that reflect divisions between competing monarchies.

The return of Russia in the Middle East

Russia's geopolitical objectives in the Persian Gulf can be summarized as follows: Thirty years after the Russian withdrawal from the Persian Gulf at the beginning of the first Gulf War, it is appropriate for it to contain Islamist extremists, which are likely to spread in Russia or in its immediate vicinity; to support allied regimes by building sustainable geopolitical partnerships; to minimize the Russian military presence in the region; to increase Russia's shares in the arms, nuclear energy, oil and gas market; and to attract to Russia the investments of the monarchies of the gulf. However, Russian efforts to reconnect with Saudi Arabia have not been successful so far. From a geopolitical point of view, Russia is developing an alternative route to the India-Russia maritime route. This is the International North-South Transport Corridor that connects India to Russia via Iran and Azerbaijan. This rail and road route can be seen on the eastern coast of the Persian Gulf, taking an itinerary formerly used by imperial Russia.

The growing presence of China

At present, China imports 20% of its oil from the Persian Gulf. Its presence in the region is not new but is considerably growing. A new transport corridor has been put in place between China and the Persian Gulf across Pakistan. This 10300 km long international container line connects Gilgit-Batistan with Gwadar. The connection of the continental powers to the Persian Gulf by land recalls some projects of the central powers during the First World War, imagining to connect Hamburg to the Persian Gulf by rail. This line of communication will reduce the distance between China and the Persian Gulf. The port of Gwadar is only 180 nautical miles from Strait of Hormuz.

The geopolitical situation of the Persian Gulf is therefore changing. The American naval thaw enables a game with three

players. On the one hand, the suspicious allies of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. On the other, the Iranian historical opponent. And between the two, the opportunistic neutrals represented by Oman, Qatar and Kuwait. It is in this direction that the ascending Asian powers have instinctively turned, in order to challenge American unilateralism.