

### **"The churn in the Persian Gulf provides India an opening to step up its strategic engagements beyond investments in the Chabahar port."**

Recent developments in the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca help reveal India's emerging challenges and opportunities on the maritime front. To the west of the country, international shipping is on high alert amidst the escalating tensions in the region between Iran and its neighbours on the one hand and between Tehran and Washington on the other. According to some estimates, at least 17 countries have been affected, either directly or indirectly, by the recent attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf region.

To the east, China has put its commercial shipping passing through the Straits of Malacca on a high alert. While the tensions in the Gulf centred around Iran are visible, the littoral states of the Malacca Straits are mystified at the Chinese decision to put its ships on alert. The three littoral states of the Malacca Straits — Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore — say they see no evidence of a real or potential threat.

Some believe that the Chinese decision might be based on intelligence about a local terror attack on its shipping. Others suspect this could be a prelude a larger move by China to establish a significant naval presence at the Malacca Straits that is seen as Beijing's economic "life line".

Every year, nearly \$500 billion worth of trade passes through the Straits of Hormuz. The value of commerce flowing through the Malacca Straits annually is estimated at more than \$3 trillion. Threats to the shipping in the straits of Hormuz and Malacca, however, are not new. What is new, though, is the US insistence that Asia pay for its energy security in the Gulf. In a tweet last month, President Donald Trump said Asian countries "should be protecting their own ships."

The US has long been guarantor of maritime security in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Trump is now questioning the costs and benefits of this historic American role. This is very similar to the US pressure on its European allies to contribute a greater share of the costs for the maintenance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. That allies "free ride" on American shoulders has been at the heart of Trump's world view. And he has been determined to ramp up the pressure against its partners in Europe and Asia to change the relative security burdens.

That the US is no longer dependent on oil imports from the Middle East and has become a major hydrocarbon exporter, have created the new economic context for Trump's questioning of traditional American commitments to the Gulf. On his part, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has reportedly told Trump at their meeting in Osaka last month that he has ordered the Indian Navy into the Gulf to escort the Indian oil tankers.

Since the Osaka talks, the story has moved on. Senior US officials, including General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have unveiled plans to build an international coalition to secure the Gulf. Japan and South Korea are reportedly considering participation in such a coalition.

While Tokyo and Seoul are ambivalent about incurring additional costs to secure their oil imports, Beijing might be better prepared — in terms of capabilities as well as ambitions — to take larger responsibility for security in the Gulf. A decade ago, when piracy threatened international shipping in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea, China initiated naval deployments that have turned into a permanent military presence in the region.

Since then, China has set up its first foreign military base in Djibouti. Beijing has intensified its military engagement in the Gulf and the Arabian Sea littoral. The US's demand that Asians do more for securing the flows of energy, provides China with an unprecedented opportunity to carve out a larger role for itself in the Gulf.

The opportunity should be equally attractive to India. After all, Delhi is closer to the Gulf than Beijing and is in a better position to raise its maritime profile in the littoral. It has big stakes in the Gulf as well as a longer tradition of providing security to the region. Meanwhile, the countries in the Gulf region are looking to diversify their security partnerships as an insurance against potential downsizing of American security commitments. But the public debate in Delhi is focused rather narrowly on the implications of the Gulf crisis for its planned investments in Iran's Chabahar port and on finding ways to appear neutral.

One hopes that the Modi government is thinking a little more boldly about India's strategic possibilities in the Gulf amidst a historic churn shaking up this oil-rich region and its relationship to the world. More broadly, as Asia rises and the US rethinks its role in providing public goods in the Indo-Pacific, Delhi must aim to do more for maritime security on its own as well as through coalitions of like-minded countries. After all, Modi has often suggested that India must aspire to become a "leading power" and take greater responsibility for regional security in India's neighbourhood.

## GS World Team...

### Rising dispute between US-Iran

#### Why in the discussion?

- Recently, Iran violated the limits set for the production of enriched uranium in the 2015 nuclear deal and cautioned against counteracting Europe.
- Along with this, it is believed that Iran has stepped in to break the historic agreement with P5+1 and the European Union in 2015, during which the limit of uranium storage was fixed.
- Significantly, Iran has crossed the 300-kilogram limit on the basis of its plans announced in May.
- Behrouz Kamalvandi the spokesperson of Iran's Nuclear Energy Organization has announced to cross the limit (3.7%) and reach enrichment to (4.5%).
- Kamalwandi has indicated that the Islamic Republic may retain this level of enrichment for some time, which is far below the required 90% level for making a nuclear weapon.

#### Background

- The US had withdrawn itself from the nuclear deal last year and again imposed strong restrictions on Iran's important oil exports and financial transactions and other areas.
- Iran, who had announced an attempt to increase the pressure on its other partners to save the agreement, would not accept the limit imposed on the enriched uranium and heavy water reserves.
- He also threatened that he would not accept nuclear commitments until Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia, the remaining partners of the agreement - do not get rid of these restrictions, especially with restrictions on the sale of oil.
- Under the deal in 2015, Iran has committed to keep an eye on the IAEA in return for not keeping a nuclear bomb, accepting the harsh restrictions imposed on its nuclear program and partial removal of international sanctions.

## Hormuz Strait

- It is also known as the Ormuz Strait. It connects the Gulf of Persia to the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.
- It separates Iran from the Arabian peninsula and is 55 to 95 km wide.
- It is mainly located in Kisham, Hormuz and Hengam (Hengm) Island.
- Most of the crude oil exported from Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE, Kuwait and Iraq are sent through this waterway.

## Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

- An agreement was reached between Iran and P5 + 1 countries (US, China, UK, France, Russia and Germany) in 2015 to monitor Iran's nuclear program. It is known as the Vienna Agreement.

- According to this, Iran agreed to regular checkup of its nuclear plants to ensure that there is no work to build nuclear weapons.
- This agreement includes reducing Iran's refined uranium reserves by 96 percent and opening all its plants to international observers.
- Under this agreement, Iran had accepted the condition of reducing its nearly nine tonnes of enriched uranium reserves to 300 kg.
- The purpose of this agreement was to stop nuclear programs. In exchange for these conditions, the western countries had agreed to remove the economic sanctions imposed on Iran.

## Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements-
1. Hormuz strait connects the Gulf of Persia and Gulf of Oman.
  2. The Malakka strait joins Indian ocean and Pacific ocean.
- Which of the above statement are correct?
- (a) Only 1                      (b) Only 2  
(c) Both 1 and 2              (d) Neither 1 nor 2

## Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

- Q. Considering the recent events of Hormuz and Malakka straits, underline the challenges and opportunities in front of India on oceanic front. (250 Words)

**Note:** Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 15 July. is 1(d).