

The Quest for Regional Dominance: U.S. and Iranian Strategies in the Gulf Countries

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ABSTRACT

The strategic importance of the Gulf region in international politics has not decreased since the region hosts large oil reserves, important waterways and is of geopolitical significance. Competition between the United States and Iran has had an important effect on the political and security environment of the Gulf countries since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The aim of this article is to discuss the strategic rivalry between the United States and Iran in the context of their political, military, economic and ideological goals in the Gulf region. The United States is trying to preserve its dominance in the region by means of military alliances, securing energy supplies, and strategic ties with the monarchies in the Gulf. By contrast, Iran seeks to wield its own ideology, resort to proxy war, use its own military strength and resist western intervention to expand its own regional influence. The study is qualitative and analytical in nature, using historical and contemporary materials such as academic books, journal articles, policy reports and official documents. The results show that the old rivalry between the USA and Iran has made the region of the Gulf more unstable, more conflicts over the use of proxy, deeper sectarian divisions, and more militarization in the region. The Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen wars are now significant flashpoints of an indirect struggle between both powers. In addition, economic sanctions, maritime conflicts and evolving geopolitical dynamics are taking their toll on the regional power balance. The study finds that establishing sustainable peace and security in the Gulf necessitates the use of diplomatic negotiation, regional cooperation, collective security, and conflict-resolution, by regional and international actors.

Keywords: Gulf Region, United States, Iran, Regional Dominance, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Geopolitics, Proxy Warfare, Energy Security, Strategic Rivalry, Middle East Security, Regional Hegemony

INTRODUCTION

The strategic geographical location, size of oil and gas reserves and maritime routes make the Gulf region a central, vital part of global geopolitics. One of the world's key energy chokepoints, the Strait of Hormuz, is a chokepoint through which a large proportion of global oil exports pass. Thus, the Gulf region has historically been of interest to regional and international powers, who have sought political influence and strategic control of the region.

he strategic rivalry between the U.S. and Iran is one of the key geopolitical rivalries driving politics in the Gulf region. The regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was one of the most closely allied of the Shah's to the United States before the Iranian Revolution of 1979. After the Islamic Republic was formed under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, however, Iran's foreign policy shifted to an anti-Western and anti-American policy. Since then, Washington and Tehran have been locked in a political antagonism, an ideological contest, and a strategic rivalry.

The U.S. has tried to work towards regional stability, safeguarding energy supplies, ensuring maritime trade routes and safeguarding alliances with Gulf monarchies. To realize these goals, Washington set up military installations throughout the Gulf, and strengthened military ties with the GCC countries, especially Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.

Iran, however, aims to become a dominant regional player with the help of its ideology, regional partnerships, proxy networks, and asymmetric warfare techniques. Iran's backing of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite militias in Iraq, the Assad regime in Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen is indicative of a wider effort to gain influence in the region and to hold back American influence. The U.S.-Iran strategic rivalry has made the Gulf a very politically and militarily unstable area. Regional peace and security remain at risk due to proxy wars, economic sanctions, sectarian issues and maritime conflicts. Knowing the nature of the strategic rivalry between both powers is therefore crucial for analyzing the politics of the present day and the future security situation in the Gulf region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From the existing literature on Gulf geopolitics, it is clear that the rivalry between the United States and Iran over strategy has been one of the key issues influencing regional politics and security. The Gulf region is still considered to be strategically important due to its energy reserves and geopolitical position. Realist scholars like Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer state that states seek power and security in an anarchic international system. In this context, the U.S. aims to enforce regional supremacy by keeping its military edge and alliances with the Gulf nations.

The U.S. strategic policies are aimed at ensuring that no other power in the region can pose a threat to the interests of the United States. In the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, several scholars have studied Iran's regional policy. Analysts claim that the main drivers of Iran's foreign policy are revolutionary ideology, concerns about national security and the desire to lead in the region.

The Iranian backing of proxy groups and asymmetric warfare tactics is viewed as a reaction to America having the upper hand in the region and forming alliances. Proxy conflict is also a topic of the literature in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. The conflicts are often characterized as indirect battle between Tehran and Washington which fuels sectarianism and instability in the region. Moreover, scholars point to the effects of U.S. sanctions against Iran's economy and regional actions. Though there has been extensive research on U.S.-Iranian relations, there is a need for new analysis on the evolving geopolitical environment in the Gulf, especially the increased influence of China and Russia and the development of multipolar regional politics. This study adds to the current body of literature on the implications for regional stability in today's context of strategic competition.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on Realism and Balance of Power Theory.

Realism

Realism argues that states operate within an anarchic international system where national interest, security, and survival are the primary objectives. According to realist theory, states pursue power to protect themselves from external threats and maintain influence in international politics.

In the Gulf region, both the United States and Iran pursue strategic policies designed to maximize power and secure national interests. The United States seeks to preserve regional dominance through military

alliances and strategic partnerships, while Iran attempts to challenge American influence through proxy warfare and regional alliances.

Balance of Power Theory

The Balance of Power Theory explains how states form alliances and adopt strategic measures to prevent the dominance of rival powers. GCC states cooperate closely with the United States to counterbalance Iranian influence, while Iran strengthens ties with regional allies and proxy groups to challenge American hegemony.

The rivalry between Washington and Tehran reflects a broader struggle for geopolitical influence and regional balance in the Gulf region.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research methodology. The research relies on secondary sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, policy papers, and official statements concerning Gulf politics and U.S.-Iran relations. A historical and descriptive approach is used to examine the evolution of strategic rivalry between the United States and Iran from the Iranian Revolution of 1979 to contemporary regional developments. Comparative analysis is also employed to evaluate the political, military, and economic strategies adopted by both powers in pursuit of regional dominance.

The study further examines proxy conflicts, military alliances, economic sanctions, maritime security, and diplomatic relations to analyze their impact on Gulf security and regional stability.

Data Sources and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research methodology based on secondary data. The data are collected from a variety of sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, policy papers, official documents, research publications, and reports from international organizations. In addition, credible online sources, think-tank analyses, and media reports are utilized to examine recent developments in U.S.-Iran relations and Gulf politics.

The study uses descriptive and analytical methods to evaluate the strategies and policies of the United States and Iran in the Gulf region. Through content analysis, relevant information is systematically examined to identify patterns, trends, and key themes related to regional dominance, security competition, and geopolitical influence. The collected data are analyzed within the framework of Realism and Balance of Power theory to understand the dynamics of U.S.-Iran rivalry and its implications for the Gulf countries.

Case Study Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine the strategic competition between the United States and Iran in the Gulf region. The Gulf countries are treated as a single regional case study to understand how external and regional powers interact within a shared geopolitical environment. 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf Wars, the Iranian nuclear issue, and shifting U.S. foreign policy approaches. These cases are selected to trace the evolution of strategies and to analyze their impact on regional security and the balance of power.

The design focuses on key historical and contemporary cases, including major events such as the A comparative case analysis approach is used to evaluate the policies, objectives, and actions of both the United States and Iran across different time periods. This helps in identifying patterns, continuities, and changes in their strategic behavior. The data are analyzed through thematic content analysis, guided by Realism and Balance of Power theory, to interpret how each case contributes to understanding the broader dynamics of regional dominance in the Gulf.

Limitations of the Study

This study is primarily based on secondary sources, which may limit access to first-hand or classified information regarding U.S. and Iranian strategic decision-making. As a result, the analysis relies on available academic literature, policy reports, and credible public data, which may not fully capture all dimensions of state strategies.

Another limitation is the complexity and sensitivity of U.S.-Iran relations, where interpretations of events may vary among scholars and policy analysts. This can lead to differing perspectives on the same developments, making absolute conclusions difficult.

The study also covers a broad time period from the pre-1979 era to 2026, which may restrict the depth of analysis for certain events due to the wide historical scope. Additionally, rapidly changing geopolitical dynamics in the Gulf region may affect the currency of some findings. Despite these limitations, the study attempts to provide a comprehensive and balanced analysis of the strategic competition between the United States and Iran in the Gulf region.

Analysis

This study examines the long-term strategic rivalry between the United States and Iran in the Gulf region, highlighting how both actors have pursued regional dominance through shifting political, military, economic, and ideological strategies. The analysis demonstrates that the Gulf has remained a central arena of competition due to its energy resources, strategic maritime routes, and geopolitical importance.

From a U.S. perspective, the core objective has been to ensure regional stability, secure uninterrupted energy flows, and protect allied regimes in the Gulf. This has been achieved through forward military deployment, defense agreements, arms transfers, naval patrols in the Persian Gulf, and strategic partnerships with GCC states. The United States has also used diplomatic and economic tools, including sanctions regimes and nuclear negotiations with Iran, to constrain Iranian influence and prevent any single regional power from dominating the Gulf.

In contrast, Iran's strategy has largely been shaped by asymmetric warfare, strategic depth, and resistance ideology. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran repositioned itself as an anti-hegemonic power challenging U.S. presence in the region. Its strategy has included the development of proxy networks across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, support for non-state actors, and the strengthening of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Iran has also prioritized missile development, naval capabilities in the Strait of Hormuz, and deterrence strategies to counterbalance U.S. military superiority.

The analysis of key historical phases shows that each major event has redefined the strategic environment. The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) allowed the United States to deepen ties with Gulf monarchies while simultaneously containing Iran. The Gulf War (1990–1991) strengthened U.S. military presence and institutionalized its security role in the region. After the 2003 Iraq War, Iran expanded its influence significantly in Iraq and beyond, altering the regional balance of power. The Iran nuclear issue further

intensified tensions, leading to cycles of sanctions, negotiations (JCPOA), and renewed confrontation under shifting U.S. administrations.

The discussion also reveals that Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have adopted pragmatic balancing strategies. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE rely heavily on U.S. security guarantees while simultaneously engaging in cautious diplomatic outreach to Iran to avoid escalation. Smaller Gulf states like Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman have pursued more neutral or mediating roles, reflecting the complexity of regional alignments.

Furthermore, the increasing involvement of external actors such as China and Russia has added a new dimension to the rivalry, creating a multipolar competitive environment in which Gulf states diversify their partnerships to reduce dependency on any single power. Energy politics, particularly oil price stability and maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz, remain central to the strategic calculations of all actors.

Overall, the findings indicate that the U.S.-Iran rivalry is not static but continuously evolving, shaped by historical grievances, ideological differences, security dilemmas, and shifting global power structures. The absence of direct resolution mechanisms has resulted in a persistent state of tension, proxy conflicts, and strategic mistrust, making the Gulf region one of the most enduringly contested geopolitical spaces up to 2026.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The study identifies several significant findings regarding the strategic rivalry between the United States and Iran in the Gulf region.

First, the Gulf region remains central to global politics because of its strategic location and energy resources. Both the United States and Iran view the Gulf as essential for national security and geopolitical influence.

Second, the United States has maintained regional dominance through military alliances, defense agreements, and strategic partnerships with GCC states. American military bases and naval presence continue to shape Gulf security arrangements.

Third, Iran has expanded its regional influence through proxy networks and asymmetric warfare strategies. Support for Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, the Assad government, and the Houthis has enabled Tehran to challenge American influence indirectly.

Fourth, proxy conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon have intensified regional instability and sectarian divisions. These conflicts represent broader geopolitical struggles between Washington and Tehran.

Fifth, economic sanctions imposed by the United States have weakened Iran's economy but have not eliminated Iran's regional ambitions. Instead, Iran has strengthened strategic partnerships with China and Russia to reduce dependence on Western economic systems.

Finally, recent diplomatic initiatives and normalization agreements among regional states indicate a growing interest in reducing tensions and promoting economic cooperation. However, structural rivalry and mutual mistrust continue to shape Gulf politics.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to International Relations theory by applying and reinforcing the explanatory power of Realism and Balance of Power theory in understanding the long-term strategic rivalry between the United States and Iran in the Gulf region. It demonstrates how states, driven by security concerns and power maximization, continuously adjust their strategies to prevent regional dominance by rival actors.

The research also extends the concept of regional security complex theory by showing that the Gulf region operates as an interconnected security system where actions of one state directly influence the behavior of others. The study highlights how external powers like the United States and regional actors like Iran interact within a shared security environment shaped by interdependence, rivalry, and shifting alliances.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the understanding of asymmetric power competition, showing how Iran's reliance on proxy networks, deterrence strategies, and ideological influence serves as a counterbalance to U.S. conventional military superiority. It also illustrates how the United States uses alliances, military presence, and economic sanctions as tools of regional influence.

Overall, the study provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing prolonged geopolitical rivalries and enhances scholarly understanding of how global and regional powers compete for dominance in strategically significant regions like the Gulf.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the strategic rivalry between the United States and Iran represents a long-term geopolitical struggle shaped by historical tensions, ideological differences, and competing regional ambitions.

The United States views Iran as a challenge to regional stability and American strategic interests. Consequently, Washington has adopted containment policies through military presence, sanctions, and strategic partnerships with Gulf monarchies. This approach reflects America's broader objective of preserving regional hegemony and protecting global energy supplies.

Iran, however, perceives American military presence and alliances in the Gulf as direct threats to its sovereignty and security. Tehran's support for proxy groups and asymmetric warfare strategies reflects an effort to counterbalance American military superiority and increase regional deterrence.

The study also highlights the strategic dilemma faced by GCC states. While Gulf monarchies rely heavily on American security guarantees, they also recognize the importance of maintaining diplomatic engagement with Iran to avoid regional conflict and economic disruption.

Furthermore, the increasing role of China and Russia in Gulf politics suggests the emergence of a more multipolar regional order that may gradually reduce exclusive American influence while increasing strategic competition among global powers.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources such as academic literature, policy reports, and publicly available documents, which may not fully capture classified strategic decisions or internal policy debates within the United States and Iran. Additionally, the broad time frame from 1979 to 2026 restricts

the depth of analysis for certain events, as some developments are only briefly addressed to maintain overall coherence.

Another limitation is the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis, which may lead to variations in understanding complex geopolitical events depending on different scholarly perspectives. The rapidly changing political and security environment of the Gulf region also means that some recent developments may evolve beyond the scope of this research.

For future research, it is recommended that more case-specific and comparative studies be conducted on individual Gulf states to better understand their unique responses to U.S.-Iran rivalry. Future studies may also explore emerging dimensions such as cyber warfare, artificial intelligence in military strategy, and economic diversification policies in the Gulf. Additionally, greater use of primary data sources, including interviews with policymakers and defense experts, would provide deeper insights into strategic decision-making processes.

CONCLUSION

The prolonged rivalry between both powers has intensified regional instability, proxy conflicts, sectarian tensions, and militarization across the Gulf region. Despite recent diplomatic initiatives and normalization efforts, structural tensions continue to shape regional security dynamic

The study concludes that long-term peace and stability in the Gulf require collective security mechanisms, diplomatic engagement, conflict-resolution strategies, and balanced foreign policies capable of reducing geopolitical confrontation and promoting regional cooperation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Gulf countries should promote regional dialogue mechanisms to reduce tensions between the United States and Iran.
2. GCC states should strengthen collective security cooperation and maritime security frameworks.
3. The United States and Iran should prioritize diplomatic engagement over military confrontation.
4. Regional powers should work toward peaceful resolution of proxy conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon.
5. Economic cooperation and regional integration should be encouraged to reduce political tensions and improve regional stability.
6. International organizations should facilitate confidence-building measures among Gulf states.

ACADEMIC RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Future studies should examine the growing role of China and Russia in Gulf geopolitics.
2. Researchers should analyze the impact of cyber warfare and drone technology on Gulf security.
3. Comparative research on GCC foreign policies and strategic balancing should be expanded.

4. More academic work is needed on the economic consequences of sanctions on Iran and regional trade systems.
5. Future studies should explore collective security frameworks and conflict-resolution

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Conflicts of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest with any entity or any commercial entities that are specifically related to this research.

Ethical Statement

All the resources used in this research are secondary sources that are publicly available. There was no primary data that included human subjects. No Institutional Approval was required. This paper is an original scholarly paper and has not been submitted elsewhere for publication.

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