

An Analysis on the Perspective for Establishing the Persian Gulf Sub-regional Security Order¹

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Abstract: *The Middle East has been a region involved with various problems for many years. Recently the Iranian nuclear issue is bringing the attention of the international society to the security situation in the Persian Gulf region. With the rising of Iran after the Iraq War, Iran is willing to cooperate with the other Persian Gulf states to establish a sub-regional security order. According to the regionalism theory, the establishment of the security region means a kind of effort to transfer a certain geographic region suffering from clashes among nations and domestic conflicts into a security community that will commit itself to the cooperation with the outside world and keeping peace inside. For this purpose, Iran is now improving its relation with Iraq, opening dialogue with GCC states, and pledging its neighbor states that its nuclear program is only for the peace purpose. With its advantageous conditions, strong will and active preparation, it is highly possible for Iran to establish a sub-regional stability and order in the Persian Gulf region in the future.*

Key Words: *Iran; Iraq; Israeli-Arab Peace Process; Middle East Sub-regions; Persian Gulf; Security Order*

Five years have passed since the end of the Iraq War. But the security situation in the Middle East has not been improved as expected. Except that the Palestine-Israeli peace process is still in a difficult situation and the reconstruction in Iraq is in difficulty, the Middle East region is now facing new problems such as the Iranian nuclear affairs, the bitter contradiction between Iran and Israel, and the security crisis caused by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) of Turkey. Since it is almost impossible to solve all these old and new problems at the same time, it is reasonable to deal with these problems in different sub-regions separately. As far

¹ The research is the product of Chinese Educational Ministry program "EU's Middle East Strategy in 21st Century Studies" (05JJDGJW045), and it is also supported by the funding of B702 of *Shanghai's Key Disciplines Development Program*.

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as the Persian Gulf is concerned, the international society is concerning itself about the Iranian nuclear issue and is wishing to solve it in a peaceful way on one hand, and the Iranian government is willing to cooperate with the other Persian Gulf states to improve the stability and security on the other hand, Therefore, it is very hopeful for the Persian Gulf to establish its security order in the future with the cooperation of the states in this sub-region.

I. The Applicability of Sub-regionalism in Establishing a Persian Gulf Security Structure

According to the regionalism theory, the establishment of the security region means a kind of efforts to transfer a certain geographic region suffering from clashes among nations and domestic conflicts into a security community that will commit itself to the cooperation with the outside world and keeping peace inside. As for the concept of a security community, it means a complex of nations, no matter homogenous or heterogeneous, which have connected the security and insecurity process with each other so closely that no security issues can be solved separately.

In general, the Middle East is a region that has much more diversity than similarity. In this region, there are various contradictions existing among nations. Since the region lacks common characteristic and compromise, the nations in this region also differ greatly from each other in their understanding of the national threat and national interests. For instance, the Iraq War that erupted in 2003 has totally changed the security balance structure in Persian Gulf region. But it has had relatively no serious influence on the nations in the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. However, there is still one issue that is so closely related to all nations in the Middle East. If the Israeli-Arabian peace process can not make important progress, it will be impossible for the Arabian nations to participate in any regional forum in case Israel is present. This situation is also futile for the solution of the regional security and the political and economic reforms in the Arabian nations.

Facing such a complicated situation, the extensive regional security plan should give its place to the sub-regional security concept. On this background, the concept of a sub-region is developed from the regionalism theory to dispose the problems in the Middle East. It stresses that the Middle East range should be defined as little as possible, because it is an uncertain geopolitical region in its identity. The way to realize the strategy for establishing the sub-regional security order is to deal with the regional security problems in different sub-regions

separately. This will make the problems much easier to be solved. In a relatively small area, all sides will have more common characteristics. It will be much more convenient for them to accept the manner of solution for this sub-region.

Based on the geographic location, the sub-regional concept divides the Middle East into three sub-regions. The first is the south Mediterranean sub-region, which covers Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia; the second is the east Mediterranean sub-region, which covers Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey; the third is the Persian Gulf sub-region, which covers the member nations of GCC, Iran, Iraq, and Yemen. As for the Persian Gulf region, the main advantage in the sub-regional concept is that it can separate the core security problem concerned by the GCC member nations, Iran, Iraq and Yemen from the security problem stressed by all other Arabian nations in the Middle East. For the whole Middle East, the sub-regional concept will promote the common efforts of different sub-regions and unite them together to solve the Israeli-Arabian conflict problem at last.

Critically to say, the concept of sub-regional security is also developed from the failure of the foreign powers to build up a whole security structure in the Middle East. After the Cold War, the foreign powers were once striving to promote the peace process, arms control and regional security in the whole Middle East. For this purpose, the arms control and regional security group led by the US held five multi-negotiations to support the peace process between Israel and its neighbors from January 1992 to September 1995.³ However, since these negotiations had intentionally excluded Libya, Iran and Iraq and refused Syria and Lebanon to participate, the process of the negotiations became very difficult. At the same time, the nations in Persian Gulf and the North Africa were explaining that the group led by the US had neglected the security in these two sub-regions in its effort to reach a whole Middle East regional security agreement. Therefore, when the group was trying to establish a security center in Jordan for the whole Middle East region, Tunisia and Qatar proclaimed that they hope to set up their own sub-regional security centers. Finally, as the group had no way to reach a complete solution plan for the Israeli-Arabian conflict in time, to establish a mechanism to accommodate the interests among the different sub-regions, and to deal with the problem of the mass destruction arms proliferation in the whole Middle East, the arms control and regional security process failed. This failure means it is almost impossible to make a plan to solve all the security problems in the Middle East at the present time.

Considering the experience of the arms control and regional security working group, the sub-regional concept has designed an approach called "fire proofing

³ Michael D. Yaffe, "Promoting Arms Control and Regional Security in the Middle East," *Disarmament Forum*, Spring 2001, pp. 9-25.



wall". The main point of this approach stresses that the Persian Gulf region and North African region should not be affected by the delay of the Israeli-Arabian peace process in promoting their own security order. Though the east The Mediterranean sub-region has no way to avoid the problem of the Israeli-Arabian conflict, the process of solving the problem of the Israeli-Arabian situation in this sub-region should not become an obstacle for other sub-regions to solve their own security problems. Therefore, the crucial point of the sub-regional security concept is to solve the security problems of different sub-regions separately through corresponding efforts and the security problems of different sub-regions should not affect each other. This concept also stresses that the security problems of a certain sub-region only involve the nations in this region and it needs all the nations in this region to join together to solve them.

II. The Advantageous Conditions for Iran to Promote the Persian Gulf Sub-regional Security Order

In the Persian Gulf region, Iran undoubtedly is the most powerful nation especially after the Iraq War. Iran has the largest population in the Persian Gulf region and also ranks as number two energy reservation in the whole world. Before the end of the 1970s, Iran had already been the most prosperous nation in the Persian Gulf region under the leadership of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. However, the Shiite Islamic Revolution in 1979 led by Ayatollah Khomeini plunged Iran's relations with its neighbor nations into serious problem, because Khomeini declared that Iran would export the Islamic revolution to all the Arabian Muslim nations. Since the Shiite Islamic Revolution of Iran totally denied the monarchic system and deeply conflicted with the Sunni, the Arabian nations around Iran all were greatly worrying about the development of its Islamic revolution. They even supported Iraq, a nation with the Shiites as the majority but the leadership was controlled by the Sunni as a tradition for many years to contain and make war with Iran in 1980s.

With the collapse of the Saddam regime in the Iraq War, Iran at last got rid of its containment from Iraq and became the most powerful nation in the Persian Gulf with its greatest population and strongest military force. At the same time, the Iraq War also totally changed the relationship between Iran and Iraq. Traditionally, Iraq is a nation with the Shiites as majority but the leadership of this nation was controlled by the Sunni. After the Shiite Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the two nations were hostile with each other for more than 20 years. In the ten year war in the 1980s, both Iran and Iraq had suffered a heavy loss in human lives and their

economy. After the Sunni regime was overthrown by the US army, the Shiites in Iraq began to win their political dominant position gradually through various local elections and national elections in recent years. As Iran and Iraq are the only two Shiite majority nations in the Middle East and the Shiite belief in Iraq mainly originated from Iran, it is necessary for the two nations to establish a very close relationship, because the Shiite majority has dominated the Iraq politics after the Iraq War. Confronting the relationship between Iran and Iraq is developing into a coalition. The King of Jordan, Abdullah, even complained that there is a “Shiite Crescent” appearing in the Persian Gulf region. ⁴

With these idiographic advantage qualifications, now the Iranian government, motivated by raising the leading role of Iran in Persian Gulf on one hand and cooperating with the other Persian Gulf nations to resist against the US on the other hand, is having a strong desire to promote the sub-regional security order in the Persian Gulf. In the opening ceremony of the 18th international Persian Gulf conference which opened in Tehran on June 17, 2008, the Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki stressed in his speech, titled “Regional Cooperation: First Priority in Foreign Policy,” that “the first priority of our foreign policy is regional cooperation and convergence”. ⁵ Minister Mottaki pointed out that the main factors of instability and insecurity in the Persian Gulf are the trans-regional powers, especially the US military existence in this region. The Persian Gulf nations should cooperate on the base of cultural, economic and political conditions to design a favorable local solution by themselves. Minister Mottaki also made clear, “security in the Persian Gulf can materialize only through internal forces. You can not import security.” ⁶ In this case, Iran as the most populous and strongest nation is willing to play an important role in political, economic and cultural areas in promoting the sub-regional security order, because its cooperation with the other Persian Gulf nations is not only beneficial but also essential for Iran. Although the recent situation in Persian Gulf region is not so optimistic, as Iran is just alongside by itself with other Persian Gulf states, it is still possible for the Persian nations to make common efforts to achieve a firmly-established win-win situation in the future. For this purpose, the Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki publicly called on the neighboring nations for a new dialogue on the Persian Gulf’s security. He also looked forward

⁴ Juan Cole, Outlook: Shiite Iraq, *Washington Post* Online Chat, August 16, 2004, http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/zforum/04/r_outlook081604.htm.

⁵ Hengame Ahmadi, “Regional Cooperation: First Priority in Foreign Policy”, *Iran News*, Tuesday, June 17, 2008.

⁶ Ibid.



to the various platforms for dialogues to become the foundation of economic-political unions in the zone.

III. The Preparation That Iran Has Made to Establish the Sub-regional Security Order in Persian Gulf

Recently the Persian Gulf region has become so important in the international politics and economy that both Persian Gulf nations and the international society are expecting a new security order to be established there as soon as possible. On the basis of its strong will, the Iranian government has already made some efforts to make the preparation and the international society is also looking forward to the promotion of the process.

In the Persian Gulf, more than the past 20 years after the Iranian Islamic Revolution has witnessed a serious and tense relationship between Iran and the other nations. After the Iraq War, Iran has already begun to make efforts to change its relationship with other Persian Gulf nations. In its relation with Iraq, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Iraq on March 2, 2008 was a symbolic sign in the improving relations between these two nations. This is not only the first Iranian president visiting Iraq in the past 30 years, but it is also the beginning of a new era in their relations. Ahmadinejad stressed, "We talked just as friends and brothers. We can reach common understanding in all areas and both sides are planning to fully improve the relation between the two nations."⁷ In this visit, Iran strengthened the political connection through the ligament of Shiite, because most Iraqi political leaders, including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, used to be exiled in Iran during Saddam's ruling. Besides this, Iran has signed 7 economic cooperation agreements with Iraq, involving insurance, custom, industry, education and transportation. Iran also promised to supply a billion USD loan for the reconstruction in Iraq.⁸

In its relations with the GCC nations, Iran is also making great efforts to improve relations with them and to establish confidence among them. Firstly, Iran is promoting the development of the GCC and to expect it to become a real PGCC (Persian Gulf Cooperation Commission). This development will be helpful to make a stable foundation for the security order in this sub-region. As a fact, the relations between Iran and the GCC have suffered too much tension from the 1980s to the early 21st century. However, Iran has given up its ambition to spread the Islamic revolution in the neighboring Arabian nations, as well as the monarchical Arabian

⁷ " Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Iraq: We Talked Just As Friends and Brothers, " http://news.cnwest.com/content/2008-03/03/content_1165283.htm.

⁸ <http://www.jmnews.com.cn> 2008-3-4 17:04.

nations in the Persian Gulf that have traditionally insisted on a gentle political position and they have a strong desire to keep peaceful relations with Iran. Iran and the GCC have covered a considerable distance recently. At the same time, there is a significant change from the open hostility of the 1980s and an active attempt has been made by both sides to engage with each other and to keep the process of dialogue open. Actually, considerable change had happened during the Khatami administration in Iran. This change was also reflected somewhat in the stance adopted by the GCC states in the current Iranian nuclear debate. Essentially the GCC states seek to keep the discussion about the issue away from the public arena. They also have placated Iran to avoid antagonizing a US military confrontation and rely on EU diplomacy to solve the problem through negotiations. The GCC states are also mindful of the significant measure of public sympathy for Iran's nuclear ambitions in the Arab world, especially at the popular level. They have realized, as the Arab rulers have done as well, that "appearing too close to the US position and alienating Iran might become a liability in the light of their internal political dynamics".⁹

Therefore, the relations between Iran and the GCC at the current moment have been improved gradually and stably. In a landmark event, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became the first Iranian leader to attend the GCC Annual Summit in Doha in December 2007. From open opposition to each other, the two regional powers, Iran and the Persian Gulf monarchies as a collective, now seem to be making an effort towards regional cooperation. Realizing the advantages that both could offer to each other in economic and political arenas and the disadvantages of a possible inter-state war in the region, both the current Iranian government and the GCC are leaving the doors for regional dialogue open, which has really prepared a stable foundation for establishing the sub-regional security order in Persian Gulf.

To eliminate the suspicion of the neighboring nations, the Iranians are trying their best to persuade the GCC states that its nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes. The Iranian officials have repeatedly stressed the purpose for developing nuclear program in Iran is only for changing its energy structure. To win the confidence from the GCC nations, the Iranian Foreign Minister openly expressed that Iran was ready to aid its neighbors in generating nuclear energy. At the same time, the Iranian government vehemently opposed the idea that they were preparing weapons of mass destruction especially nuclear weapons. Based on its international commitments, Iran guaranteed that it would pursue its nuclear

⁹ Stuti Bhatnagar, "The Changing Face of Iran-PGCC Relations", *Abstract of the 18th International Conference on the Persian Gulf*, Tehran, 16-17 June 2008, p.25.



program under the observation of IAEA. When EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana presented the group's 5+1 nuclear proposal on June 15, 2008, the Iranian government immediately expressed that it would mull over the package. The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad-Ali Hosseini proclaimed, "Iran is ready for talks with Group 5+1 on the package of incentives presented to Iran by EU foreign policy and security chief Javier Solana."¹⁰

As for the Iran-phobia across the Persian Gulf region, the Iranian government pointed out that it was a plot promoted by its enemies and that it was destined to fail. The Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki declared that Iran's goal was only to fight the world powers' desire of monopolization of the energy management in the world's most energy-rich region. But he claimed that the foes of the Islamic Republic were detailing plots to portray the Iranian benign nuclear program as a regional threat. Envisaging the situation, it is necessary for the Persian Gulf states to cooperate to confront the US hegemonic approach and military invasion. The Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki especially emphasized that the Doha Agreement in 2007 should be a perfect example of a prosperous project brokered by regional states.

Besides Iran's efforts, the international society is also figuring on a sub-regional security order to be established in the Persian Gulf. Though the UN Security Council has recently passed "Resolution 1803" of sanctions against Iran for the nuclear plan and its related affairs, there are three points related to this resolution worthy to which the Iranian government can pay attention. First, the purpose of the resolution, as the Chinese government has repeatedly stressed, is not for creating new sanctions but to activate a new round of diplomatic negotiations to solve the problem. In his speech on March 4, 2008, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman stressed, "The purpose of Resolution 1803 adopted by the UN Security Council is not to punish Iran but to facilitate the resumption of talks, in a bid to activate a new round of diplomatic efforts. China hopes that resolutions of the UN Security Council and IAEA could be fully implemented in a really earnest manner."¹¹ Second, since the energy resource in the Persian Gulf has been so important for the world economic development, the international society is not only concerned about the Iranian nuclear issues but also expects Iran to play an important role in establishing a new security order in this sub-region. Third, the UN resolution also has dispelled the validity of the US using armed force to interfere with Iran and decreased the possibility of any military action. It actually gave Iran a good chance to harmonize its relations with the international system

¹⁰ "Iran says 5+1 Package under Study," http://www.english.china.com/zh_cn/news/international/11020308/20080623/14925254.html.

¹¹ Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang's Remarks on UN Security Council's Resolution on the Iranian Nuclear Issue, <http://houston.china-consulate.org/eng/nv/fyrth/t411839.htm>

and promote a sub-regional security order in the Persian Gulf consistent with the world new order.

