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Geopolitical Power Struggle and Security Dilemma in Strait of Hormuz: Implications on Saudi-Iran Rivalry and Regional Order

ABSTRACT

This artefact explores the geopolitical power struggle and security dilemma in the Strait of Hormuz, emphasizing its impact on the Saudi-Iran rivalry and regional order. The Strait, through which approximately 21 million barrels of oil pass daily, is crucial for global energy supplies, making it a focal point for strategic interests. The historical, religious, and geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is examined, with key events such as the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War shaping their competition. Both nations have heavily invested in military capabilities, contributing to an arms race and frequent security dilemmas. Incidents like the 2019 tanker attacks highlight the fragile security environment. The involvement of external powers like the United States, Russia, and China adds complexity to the regional dynamics. Utilizing the offshoots of neo-realism, Offensive and Defensive Realism, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the strategic behaviors of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive policy measures, including dialogue mechanisms, confidence-building measures, multilateral security frameworks, and economic cooperation, to reduce tensions and promote stability in the Strait of Hormuz. Addressing these issues through multilateral cooperation is essential for ensuring long-term peace and stability in this critical region.

Keywords: Security Dilemma, Strait of Hormuz, Offensive & Defensive Realism, Saudi-Iran Rivalry, Regional Order.

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Introduction

The Strait of Hormuz, a narrow passage between the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, is one of the world's most crucial maritime chokepoints, through which about a third of global seaborne oil exports transit. Its strategic significance amplifies regional tensions, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Potter, 2014; Ghazvinian, 2021). This thesis explores the geopolitical power struggle and security dilemma in the Strait of Hormuz, focusing on its implications for the Saudi-Iran rivalry and the broader regional order.

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, deeply rooted in historical, religious, and strategic factors, is exacerbated by their competition for regional hegemony (Mabon, 2015; Gause, 2016). Iran's revolutionary zeal and strategic location contrast with Saudi Arabia's economic power and military alliances, creating a complex web of interactions influenced by both internal dynamics and external interventions. The involvement of global powers, especially the United States, further complicates the security landscape, turning the Strait of Hormuz into a flashpoint for regional and international conflicts (Katzman, 2019; Leverett, 2005).

The Strait of Hormuz has long been a major transit route for cargoes, linking the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea and onto the Indian Ocean. It has long been seen as strategically important; changes in control of the Strait have historically led to conflict (Potter, 2014; Ghazvinian, 2021). In terms of ancient trade routes and the colonial era, Potter points to what he sees as the significance of placement for all involved in The Strait. Ghazvinian offers a 20th-century perspective, as he examines the relationships created by oil and how they have altered over time after its discovery. The two illustrations show that the strategic value of the Strait makes it one of the central conflict points for regional power politics as well as global.

Over the years, Iran and Saudi Arabia have had a tumultuous relationship that experienced phases of cooperation as well as intense rivalry in different arenas such as religious, political, or strategic. This dynamic has been elaborated by Mabon (2015) and Gause (2016). Mabon examines the schism, blaming increased Sunni-Shia hostility in part on the 1979 Iranian Revolution and how this influenced relation. Gause dissects the geopolitics of competition between these states with a look at Cold War and post-9/11 regional imbalance and foreign interference as they have driven Sino-Saudi interactions. These two studies highlight the ideological underpinnings of regional politics as well as how realpolitik affects Iran-Saudi relations (Mabon 2015; Gause 2016). Several key events over the years have deeply influenced the Saudi-Iran rivalry. Matthiesen (2013) and Nasr (2006) in particular point to these critical

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junctures. Matthiesen writes: "The Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, backed largely by Saudi Arabia as a Sunni state supporting the fight against Shi'a revolutionary zeal has continued to loom large in its consequences." This aggravated the historic conflict of trust and hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Nasr looks at what became of Iraq after the US-led invasion there in 2003 and how it changed rivalries between states. The ouster of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq undeniably increased Iran's sway over Shia constituencies there, commercial activities between the two states have grown significantly, and Riyadh now expects its fears of a threat from a Shia crescent surrounding its borders to come true. Indeed, both studies show how these events have reinforced the strategic and ideological dimensions of each side's rivalry (Matthiesen, 2013; Nasr, 2006).

The regional dynamics of the Middle East have transformed greatly over these decades, owing to changes on the inside and interventions from outside. Kamrava (2013) and Lynch (2016) discuss such changes. Kamrava assesses the Arab Spring and its aftermath: how uprisings changed political dynamics by creating opportunities for Iran and Saudi Arabia to intervene in diverse ways. Lynch looks at the importance of proxy conflicts in Syria and Yemen, noting that each has accordingly used such conflict to extend influence and check other actors. They underline the fluid and nuanced regional dynamics, which have been shaped partly by local disturbances as well as the strategic choices of regional powers (Kamrava, 2013; Lynch, 2016).

The role of external powers, especially the US and Russia, has had a substantial impact on security dynamics in and around the Strait of Hormuz. This perspective is well captured by studies from Katzman (2019) and Leverett (2005). Katzman discusses the US military presence in the Gulf, pointing out that American security guarantees to GCC countries are intended as deterrents against Iran. Leverett explains Russia's strategic interest: Moscow helps Iran primarily to frustrate US regional domination, again focusing on their omnipresence at the Euphrates. These two studies show how the practices and policies of external powers have affected regional security, contributing to the strategic calculations by Iran and Saudi Arabia (Katzman, 2019; Leverett, 2005).

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative documentary data analysis methodology to explore the geopolitical power struggles and security dilemmas in the Strait of Hormuz. Qualitative research methods are well-suited for studying complex social and political phenomena, allowing for an in-depth understanding of context, motivations, and consequences (Bowen, 2009). Documentary data analysis involves systematically examining documents to gain insights into historical and contemporary events, policies, and strategies.

The rationale for choosing qualitative documentary data analysis lies in its effectiveness in providing a comprehensive understanding of the geopolitical power struggles and security dilemmas in the Strait of Hormuz. By examining various documents, such as government reports, international organization documents, academic journal articles, policy papers, and historical records, this approach uncovers patterns, themes, and insights critical for explaining the strategic behaviors and interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as the influence of external powers like the United States (Bowen, 2009; Mearsheimer, 2001).

Theoretical framework

This research paper sets the theoretical ground on which to analyze how geopolitical contest arises and breeds security dilemma in the Strait of Hormuz. Offensive Realism and Defensive Realism more broadly in the field of International Relations can be used to understand why Iran and Saudi Arabia are doing what they do see Waltz. This theoretical basis also allows us to analyze the complicated interactions between and strategic choices of countries in that region (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979).

Offensive Realism

With regard to security competition theory, Offensive Realism espoused by John Mearsheimer argues that the anarchic international system pushes all states into pursuing power maximization as only through gaining more power can a state guarantee its survival. States are naturally aggressive, driven to achieve preeminence and dominance within the world order. This theory argues that because there is not a central authority to dictate behavior, states must fend for themselves and use acts of self-help which tends to demote discrimination and leads more often than one might think in power building expansions

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(Mearsheimer 2001). According to Offensive Realism, wars are inevitable as states strive for security and look out for their well-being in an anarchic competitive world.

Rationale of Offensive Realism to Saudi-Iran Rivalry

One can even apply the principles of Offensive Realism directly to Saudi-Iran interaction. The Strait of Hormuz is important for both nations as they consider it a strategic choke-point which can threaten their economic and military security. Iran uses proxy groups as well and augments its military capabilities to leverage power, incite terror and act with resistance in order to defend its regional influence (Terrill 2011). For example, its massive investment in military capabilities and strategic alliances with the United States make Saudi Arabia mirror Iranian efforts to project power while trying to assert itself as a dominant regional actor (Gause 2016). This attempts to demonstrate power-seeking behavior as a measure of survival and regional hegemony.

Defensive Realism

Defensive realism, as popularized by Kenneth Waltz posits that states operate in an anarchic international system but are focused on ensuring their own security rather than pursuing world hegemony. States are motivated by the desire to maintain their sovereignty and not have a conflict for no reason, using strategies of survival that enable tractable way to stay alive without provoking too many hostilities (Waltz 1979). Defensive Realism explains Security through the use of Balance-of-Power structures, alliances, and status quos to deter potential aggressors. The paper underscores prudence alongside restraint: over extension and avaricious power-seeking simply render countries only more vulnerable to future insecurity.

Rationale of Defensive Realism to Saudi-Iran Rivalry

Realism (Defensive Realism) also offers a counterbalance to the Saudi-Iran rivalry. Some aspects of Iran's pursuit of defensive military capabilities, as well as its development missile systems and naval forces in the Strait of Hormuz can be seen purely on grounds that this is a way to prevent aggression against her own sovereignty (Chubin 2012;). Again, the strategic partnerships Saudi Arabia has with countries like United States (US) and its focus on buying weapons only demonstrates efforts to provide security in times of threats coming from Iran perceiving itself as stability provider in the

region. These moves from a Defensive Realism perspective are both about security at a basic level rather than dominance.

Strait of Hormuz

The Strait of Hormuz has long been a major transit route for cargoes, linking the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea and onto the Indian Ocean. It has long been seen as strategically important, changes in control of the Strait have historically led to conflict. Potter (2014) and Ghazvinian 2021 offer detailed historical examinations of the Straits as well. In terms of ancient trade routes and the colonial era, Potter points to what he sees as the significance of placement for all involved in the Strait. The regional dynamics of the Middle East has transformed greatly over these decades, owing to changes on the inside and interventions from outside. Kamrava (2013) and Lynch (2016) on such changes. Kamrava assesses the Arab Spring and its aftermath: how uprisings changed political dynamics by creating opportunities for Iran and Saudi

Arabia to intervene in diverse ways.

Lynch looks at the importance of proxy conflicts in Syria and Yemen, noting that each has accordingly used such conflict to extend influence and check other actors. They underline the fluid and nuanced regional dynamics, which have been shaped partly by local disturbances as well as strategic choices of region powers. The role of external powers, especially the US and Russia, has had a substantial impact on security dynamics in and around the Strait of Hormuz. This perspective is well captured by studies from Katzman, 2019 and Leverett, 2005. Katzman does arrive at the US military in Gulf, however, and points out that American security guarantees to GCC countries are intended as deterrents against Iran. Leverett manages to spell out pretty well where Russia's strategic interest is: Moscow helps Iran first and foremost for frustrating US- regional domination, again over their omnipresence at Euphrates. These two studies show how the practices and policies of external powers affected on regional security, contributing to strategic calculations by Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Geographical Significance

A maritime choke-point refers to a narrow passage on the sea designated as an international waterway over which vessels pass with great frequency and restricted ability for maneuvering owing to limited space. The Strait of Hormuz is one such internationally

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important channel that forms a crucial link between oil-producing nations in the Middle East, North Africa (MENA) region who need free flow of oil shipments across its waters. At its most narrow point, where it connects the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean beyond that width shrinks to only about 21 miles. It is thus a global maritime choke-point, especially for port calls along energy trade. The Strait is such a critical location that it moves about 20-21 % of the global petroleum liquids flow, be them crude oil and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), demonstrating its prominence for worldwide safety energy (EIA,2023).

The importance of the Strait geographically is enhanced by its border with It is flanked to the north by Iran and Oman in the south, constituting a location at Middle East strategic dynamics behest This makes the Strait of Hormuz one of, if not the most important waterways for regional and global powers to protect due both direct influence on military strategies as well as indirection impact through diplomatic channels that guarantee accessibility to energy resources (Cordesman 2004).

Implications for Economic and Energy Security

Just as a market has multiple choke-points and bottlenecks, the Strait of Hormuz is an economic lifeline for several countries especially in Persian Gulf. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates depend on it to export their oil and gas. Given the vital importance of these resources, any disruption in their free flow through the Strait might have devastating effects internationally - higher oil prices and an international market very much threatened (IEA, 2019). In 2019, for example, the daily volume of oil shipped through the Strait averaged close to 21 million barrels per day demonstrating how much critical global energy supplies rely on this maritime route.

This is the economic equivalent of an iceberg threatening a maritime straight, though any negligent attempt to block this flow would be far more disastrous than I am making it out. Insecure energy flow-through not as critical anymore since oil prices have fallen more than 30 percent, together the three states pump about a fifth of world supply and all must pass through the Strait to reach markets in Asia, Europe or North America. Any threat to security for these shipments -- whether via military clash or a naval blockade -- would also help stall many regional economies but also likely tip global demand balances out-of-whack given tax money they are still among key suppliers globally. As a result of this, there is an urgent

need to secure the flow of energy and economic stability across all parts in accordance with BP (2020) because if not for anything- a midst factors mentioned earlier on-freedom of navigation itself becomes pragmatic necessity.

Contemporary Geopolitical Landscape

That is another dimension of our geopolitical panorama today. The modern-day fault line of the Strait of Hormuz is layered onto a landscape defined by great power competition, and regional rivalries headed on collision courses. The Strait is on the northern end of Iran and that gives them great power as a result. Iran has threatened to close the Strait multiple times under international sanctions or military provocations, as a part of its wide regional strategy and in doing so it depolymerizes this tool (Guzansky 2015). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia tries to counterbalance Iran by expanding its own military capacity and making alliances with other states that are predominantly Western.

The involvement of external powers, including the United States, Russia and China who are each advancing their own strategic priorities on a geopolitical stage. With some of the largest naval forces in the region, particularly within its Fifth Fleet located out of Bahrain on the other end from Iran's coastline across Persian Gulf waters, America provides a cornerstone that safeguards maritime security for transit through Strait to head-off Iranian threats to deny passage as well protect oil trade from interference. Such a complex mix of regional rivalries and external interventions poses quite a volatile, unpredictable security landscape where strategic miscalculations can have systemic ramifications (Cordesman 2019)

Influence of External Powers

This is especially so because extra regional powers play a big role in the security dynamics of this strait. The Persian Gulf is already a place where the United States maintains a large naval presence - Bahrain hosts the Fifth Fleet. It is there to discourage Iranian aggression, secure its maritime trade route and defend the interests of regional allies. The US Navy has been running regimented patrols and have locked in multiple strategic partnerships with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states as part of its commitment to ensure stability across this critical waterway (Katzman, 2019).

Russia has been involved in the area, albeit less directly but just as effectively for a very long time. Moscow's strategic relationship with Tehran, which includes military and

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economic links, gives Iran the ability to directly challenge US influence. In the Strait of Hormuz, it will undermine U.S. power and pursue its own interests. (Leverett 2005) Moreover, China's expanding economic links with Gulf countries and a strategic interest to safeguard energy supplies have compelled it to be more involved in securing regional security; while trying not favor Iran or Saudi Arabia at the cost of leaning towards another state (Scobell 2018).

A member of the security architecture in the Strait of Hormuz - U.S. This is where its military presence in the shape of the Fifth Fleet acts as a deterrent to possible threats from Iran and confirms its strategic imperative to keep oil flowing through this crucial choke point. And the US also has engaged in numerous joint-military exercises with GCC states to improve regional security and nascent capabilities among allied forces (Katzman, 2019). Economic sanctions against Iran and strategic hindrance to their influence have been at the center of US policy in this region. Washington argues that its mix of military preparedness and diplomatic pressure on Tehran to, in turn, isolate Iran while also aiding U.S. allies - chief among them Saudi Arabia - is the right approach. More broadly, this strategy underscores the US determination to avert any interruption in the Strait with ramifications for international energy markets and economic stability. The American strong influence over the Strait of Hormuz is originated in context with a wider struggle between Washington and Tehran to affect regional stability seen as an inference Terrill, 2011

Findings

Instances of Security Dilemma in the Strait of Hormuz

The security dilemma in the Strait of Hormuz is between Iran and Saudi Arabia, both of whom perceive existential threats from each other. Each country sees the other's efforts to defend itself as nothing more than a first move, forcing each of them into an arms race and repositioning their strategic forces. For example, Iran's acquisition of anti-ship missiles and fast-attack naval vessels is perceived as a direct threat by Saudi Arabia, prompting it to invest in its own fleet and align more closely with the U.S. defense establishment (Chubin 2012). Support for proxy groups from Saudi Arabia makes it worse with the perception that Iran will seek to undermine Gulf monarchies and extend Iranian hegemony across the region. The geography of the Strait amplifies even this type, in so far as a local military buildup or incident runs directly into something bigger than Korea may be prepared to handle. The Strait is a global choke-point for the world's energy supplies and this security dilemma not only destabilizes the State but has implications on regional- as well as international security.

Military build-ups and strategic postures

Militarization and strategic positioning by both Iran and Saudi Arabia to protect their concerns in the strait of Hormuz. Iran has concentrated on developing its asymmetric warfare capabilities, to include ballistic missiles and anti-ship cruise missile technology backed up by a fleet of fast attack boats intended for swarm tactics (Cordesman 2004). The only reason they have these capabilities is to keep potential aggressors out, and the ability of Iran to close that strait if needed. In contrast, Saudi Arabia focuses its defense spending on maintaining warships and aircraft armed with advanced systems developed by Western suppliers being deployed in joint military operations / exercises alongside USA to showcase determination (Guzansky, 2015).

The strategic position is designed to LEAST POSSIBLE THREAT posed by Iran, while also serving as a response measure in case there are any threats streaming out of the Strait against anyone, prams and commuters. These coupled with the military build-ups on both sides of this disputed land creates an inherently fragile equilibrium, where it takes only one among countless miscalculations or incidents to set off a spiraling confrontation that could open up another front in what is already dangerously chaotic part of the world.

Accidents and Crises in the Strait

The Strait of Hormuz is no stranger to incidents, and these crises are just one example among others that reflect the precarious state of security in the Middle East. For instance, in the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 (the Tanker War), Iranian mining forced US naval units to retaliate seriously for first and only time near Abu Musa by with Operation Praying Maintenance occupation on April 18th communicate that day was: “They must have rattled his cage... ”The Goose is already waiting. The 2019 attacks -which the United States and its allies blamed on Iran - only further escalated concerns about stability in the Strait of Hormuz (Katzman, June 25, 2019). This highlights the provocative nature of such incidents, and a highly likely scenario in which they can spiral out-of-control. Every crisis is a testimony of how fragile the environment can be and one single local incident. it could have honest international consequences.

On the one hand, this preparedness to fire at someone or something is what makes sailors in the Gulf so jumpy; on the other, between Iranian territorial waters and international shipping

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lanes lies a veritable minefield of naval assets belonging to Iran(a reported 275 vessels), Saudi Arabia (235 patrol boats only¹) as well external powers including - you guessed it - American warships. Together they lend an atmosphere that could best be described as gunpowder-on-gunpowder: enough small provocations might lead either country inadvertently towards bigger clashes with greater impacts.

Impact on Local Security

The security landscapes of the Strait of Hormuz have direct and interconnected implications on regional security. Given that this narrow waterway is the most critical choke-point for Persian Gulf energy supplies, such an ongoing risk of conflict in it hurts not just Iran and Saudi Arabia but also much wider interests both within the Gulf neighborhood as well to some key international stakeholders relying on oil/natural gas projects. The military posturing and frequent crises only escalate regional security tensions, prompting conflicts that call for an arms race and greater expenditures in defense by Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) levels than anywhere else.

Furthermore, the competition and conflict in the Strait fuel sectarian problems that help to undermine governments as well (as is already effectively happening across both countries like Yemen and Syria, where Iran & Saudi have backed opposing sides for different historical reasons) (Gause 2016). This type of proxy warfare only creates further instability in the region, and makes it harder for diplomatic resolutions to be found. Meanwhile, the international community including major oil-importing countries such as India is still worried whether any disturbance in oil supplies can set a new instability across world economies. That is to say, the security of Strait Hormuz is not just a regional but also issue that critically matters for world-wide safe and sound developments.

Way Forwards

To address the security dilemmas and promote stability in the Strait of Hormuz and the broader Middle East, a multifaceted approach involving diplomatic, military, and economic strategies is essential.

Dialogue and Confidence-Building Measures:

Establishing regular dialogue mechanisms between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other regional actors can help manage security concerns and build confidence. Joint military exercises, maritime security agreements, and transparency in military activities can reduce the risks of miscalculations and accidental escalations.

Multilateral Security Frameworks:

Creating a robust multilateral security framework that includes all Gulf countries and major external powers could address the region's security issues comprehensively. Such a framework could be modeled after existing successful regional security organizations like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Engagement of International Organizations:

International organizations, such as the United Nations, can play a crucial role in mediating conflicts and promoting dialogue. Special envoys and peace processes backed by the international community can help defuse tensions and provide peaceful solutions to disputes.

Economic Cooperation and Integration:

Fostering economic cooperation and integration among Gulf countries can create interdependencies that reduce the likelihood of conflict. Joint infrastructure projects, free trade agreements, and collaboration on natural resources can strengthen economic ties and provide a foundation for sustainable peace.

Balanced Involvement of External Powers:

The involvement of external powers such as the United States, Russia, and China must be balanced to avoid further inflaming regional rivalries. Their roles should focus on promoting regional stability through dialogue, security guarantees, and support for peaceful negotiations.

Addressing Core Religious and Ideological Differences:

Any long-term solution must address the underlying political and ideological differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Efforts to foster mutual understanding and respect for each other's sovereignty and strategic interests are crucial for reducing hostilities and building a more stable regional order.

Conclusion:

The geopolitical power struggle and security dilemma in the Strait of Hormuz are central to understanding the ongoing Saudi-Iran rivalry and its implications for regional order. The strategic significance of the Strait of Hormuz cannot be overstated, as it serves as a crucial choke-point for global oil supplies, making it a focal point for both regional and international powers (Potter, 2014; Ghazvinian, 2021). The historical and religious rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been further complicated by their respective military build-ups and strategic postures. Iran's Revolutionary zeal and strategic maneuvers, such as its support for proxy

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groups and military investments, are aimed at maintaining and extending its influence in the region. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's efforts to counterbalance Iran include forming strategic alliances with Western powers, particularly the United States, and enhancing its military capabilities (Mabon, 2015; Gause, 2016).

This rivalry has led to a persistent security dilemma in the Strait of Hormuz, where actions taken by one state to increase its security often reduce the security of the other, thus perpetuating a cycle of mutual suspicion and potential conflict. The involvement of external powers, including the United States, Russia, and China, adds another layer of complexity to the regional dynamics, influencing the strategic calculations of both Iran and Saudi Arabia (Katzman, 2019; Leverett, 2005). The theoretical frameworks of Offensive and Defensive Realism provide valuable insights into the strategic behaviors of these two nations. Offensive Realism, which emphasizes power maximization, explains the aggressive posturing and military build-ups by both Iran and Saudi Arabia as efforts to dominate the regional order. In contrast, Defensive Realism, which focuses on security preservation, highlights how both nations engage in defensive measures and form alliances to protect their sovereignty and deter aggression (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979).

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