



A survey of the Strategic Importance of the Strait of Hormuz in the Middle East, with an Emphasis on Iran's Role in Maintaining its Security

Morteza Mahmoudi Lamooki ¹, Shahla Seraji ^{2*}

¹Department of Political Science, Islamic Azad University, Kish International Branch, Kish, Iran

²Department of Political Science, Islamic Azad University, Kish International Branch, Kish, Iran

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Abstract:

The Middle East has always been of interest to other countries for its geopolitical position and its vast supply of oil and gas. Meanwhile, the issue of the transfer of oil by sea is of great importance. The Strait of Hormuz is perhaps one of the most important blue-water in the world due to the geographical location of the Persian Gulf to the Free Seas. The world's superpowers, like the United States, spend billions of dollars annually on the transit of tanker ships from the area, and Iran, as the main owner of this sector can directly affect this vital strait. In this research, we are going to introduce the waterway from the political point of view and geographical location of the impact of Iran's role in maintaining the Strait.

Keywords: Strait of Hormuz, Geopolitical position, Security, Iran

Introduction

The Strait of Hormuz is a narrow waterway that connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman, 35 percent of the total oil transported by tankers and 20 percent of the global oil supply goes through this strait. This Strait is one of the most vital maritime paths of transportation of goods and energy in the world, and therefore, it is geopolitically and strategically important. To secure the Strait as a reliable waterway for the transportation

of oil and gas to the Middle East countries to all parts of the world is tied up the security of many countries that are geographically distant thousands of kilometers away. Thus, energy, security, and commercialization of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz constitute the basic elements of Iran's foreign policy. Due to the 80% Iran's exports and imports volume, it is known as one of the most sensitive and strategic areas of the country next to Tehran and Khuzestan. In

*Corresponding Author's Email: shahlaa.shahla@gmail.com

addition to economic importance, the Strait of Hormuz has special communications, military, and geopolitical advantages for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Throughout history, the strait has been the link between South and Southeast Asia with the region of Iran, Mesopotamia, the Mediterranean, and Europe, and has linked the centers of civilizations in these regions and has played an important role in the transferring and distribution of commercial goods, as well as cultural and social values. (Honarzadeh, 2004: 24) Many Western countries and, in particular, the United States try to reduce the importance of the Strait of Hormuz by proposing different alternatives to Persian Gulf energy transport and reducing their dependence on energy supplies from this waterway in times of crisis. Indeed, in doing so, it somehow calls for them to limit Iran's dominance of this strategic region of the world as a superior geographical factor and as the country's winner card in a crisis. With the emphasis on maintaining the security and stability of the global system, every single event that occurs in any corner of the world can have a widespread reflection. Considering this and the role of Iran in recent development in the region and the international system, development in Iran, both at the domestic and international levels, are always pursued with great sensitivity and care from the great powers and other governments, and concerns about the probability of occurrence of any crisis will cause insecurity in large maritime paths and, in particular, the need to pay attention to the security of the key points such as the Strait of Hormuz will provide them with immediate response. This suggests that the world is always interested in the stability and security of Iran and supports any attempt to achieve this goal.

Geographical Features of Strait of Hormuz

Strait of Hormuz is one of the most sensitive and vital waterways of our time. It is an international strait that is located between Iran and Oman, which has a special value for both countries and under the 1974 agreement between Iran and Oman, responsibility for defending this vital waterway and controlling the transit of ships is shared jointly by the two governments. The Strait of Hormuz is roughly 100 miles long and has cut off the high mountains of southern Iran towards the peninsula of Musandam. In the past, every country wanted to reach this area, tried to maintain its dominance over the waterway. (Afshar Sistani, 1994: 4) This strait is a narrow waterway connecting the semi-closed Persian Gulf through the Gulf of Oman to the Indian Ocean and international shipping lines in the Free Seas. Moreover, this waterway with its special and strategic position is considered as the West's economic artery, and it is considered the Japan of Middle East (Afshar Sistani, 1994: 3) The importance of the narrow strait that is wide between 38 and 43 km (24-24 m) is that the two sides of the land between Iran and Oman, each with 12 nautical miles (19 km), are aligned along the same line, and in this region "Free Sea" does not exist. It should be noted that the boundary between the territorial waters of Iran and Oman along the fair line is based on the agreement between the two countries in 1974. (Toloui, 1998: 65) It is a crescent-shaped strait with a length of 178 km and the smallest width of it from the Indian headstone peak located in the northeast of Omani until the mouth of Gas (Iran) is about 55 km and its usual width is 78 km, from Bandar Abbas to Surat peak, north of Oman. Its depth is variable due to the steep slope of the

Strait from north to south, near Larak Island it is near 36 meters and on the southern coast near Musandam Island, Oman is 180 to 200 meters deep. The deepest point of it is a pit with the depth of 223m, 45km from Musandam Island. Also, the entry of the Strait of Hormuz has two ridges called the "Daba" peak in the east of the United Arab Emirates, and the other is the "Al-kuh" cape on the Iranian coast (west of Jask Island). It should be noted that the Iranian triple islands (Abu Musa and Tunbs) are located at the entrance of the Strait and have a very good geopolitical position.

The Geopolitical Importance of the Strait of Hormuz

For Iran, the security of the Strait of Hormuz is of particular importance because Iran, beyond its strong army, can use its strategic ports along this waterway, as well as its islands, which have a good place in the Strait of Hormuz, to properly secure the Strait. At the mouth of the Persian Gulf, Iran has a number of strategic islands, among which there are the most important strategic positions in Iran, namely Hormoz, Larak, Qeshm, Hengam, Greater Tunb Greater and Lesser Tunbs, and Abu Musa. They form the first Iranian defense arc. This line of defense is important for protecting the Strait of Hormuz and international shipping, and it will be an indication of the impact of the fire of Iranian weapons in the area. (Nuri, 2009: 274) Iran's second line of defense in the Persian Gulf is on the bases of Bushehr, Bandar Abbas and Chabahar. Apart from the fact that the bases are a backbone for the protection of the islands in the Strait of Hormuz, the islands also serve as attacking and defensive bases. These islands Safeguarding means protecting Bandar Abbas and protecting Bandar Abbas means protecting Iran's security. Bandar Abbas is the

southern corridor of the Iranian plateau and the Bandar Abbas-Kerman route is one of the most important ways of transporting to the Iranian Plateau. (Jafari Valadani, 1997)

Geostrategic Importance

The Strait of Hormuz has a special geostrategic importance that brings it into both land and sea strategy because the Strait of Hormuz complements both of these strategies. Strait of Hormuz connects Bandar Abbas and Persian Gulf with Kerman, Fars and Iran's Plateau. (Honarzadeh, 2004: 2) The geostrategic aspects of the strait have increased its geopolitical importance and placed the Strait of Hormuz in the center of the global and regional powers' rivalry and competition. In such a way, any power that controls and governs the Strait and the islands around it, is able to change the regional and global balance of power in its favor and force its political will on the international and regional scene. The Strait of Hormuz also has a special economic status, which is discussed below:

1. Transportation Importance

The Strait of Hormuz has long been a transit point for residents and exports of the Gulf region to the Gulf of Oman and vice versa and all major powers have paid great attention to this particular importance. Today, the role of the Strait of Hormuz remains one of the main factors behind the establishment of its geopolitical identity. The geographical location of the Strait of Hormuz is responsible for transporting Iran's Plateau to the East and West of the Strait of Hormuz. And if the agreement between Iran and Turkmenistan on the connection of the railway and the Sarakhs' communications networks to Bandar Abbas is carried out, Central Asia will also connect the world's transportation network.

And as a result, the importance of the Strait of Hormuz will be doubled.

2. Economic Importance:

The Strait of Hormuz joins the global economy to the Persian Gulf region's economy in terms of providing maritime transport facilities and the communication between the Gulf family and the global family. And in the light of this link, the common need of the countries of the Persian Gulf region to this Strait is evident. Regarding the regional economy, the regional countries are also dependent on the export of goods and oil, as well as on the import of Food and welfare goods, and industrial and sanitary and weapons, to the Strait of Hormuz, the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) recently said in a report that since January to October 2011, about 70 million tons of natural gas has been diverted through the Strait of Hormuz to world markets. The research has shown that the largest growth in global gas reserves has been in the two regions of the former Soviet Union and in the Persian Gulf region and the Middle East. After Russia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, respectively, have the second, third, fourth and fifth largest gas reserves in the world. The gas reserves of this area include the northern Qatar gas fields and the South Pars field of Iran (Judat, 2001: 166). In the global economy, Western industrialized countries are dependent to the Strait of Hormuz not only to import their oil from the Persian Gulf region, but also to export their manufactured goods to the rich sale markets of the Persian Gulf region on the free trade-industrial zones such as Dubai, Jebel Ali, Kish, and Qeshm (Hafez Nia, 1992: 469)

Given the importance of the geopolitics of the region, it can be argued that the Strait of Hormuz will also play its role in the future. Because in the event of any blockage in the Strait due to the decline in oil supply and the impossibility of economic ties, crisis will climb to its highest peak.

Western countries and the US are miles away to this point, but because of their high interests, they are always present in the region and they are trying to apply their views in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, and this has an essential role in the escalation of the crisis and instability in the region.

3. Strategic Importance

In brief, the reasons for the Iranian naval power in the Strait of Hormuz and the presence of foreigners in the region due to the advantages of the Strait of Hormuz are as follows:

- Being in the course of transportation of oil required by the West.
- The defense of the Arabian Peninsula
- Being at the beginning of the Iranian Plateau atrium.
- Being in an appropriate position for entering army in Arabian Peninsula.
- Being in the position fortaking the crisis to the Pacific Ocean
- Establish continuity for the Navy.
- Establishing facilities and providing weapons and logistics.
- Geographical and legal ties of the Strait for crossing the maritime and aeronautical visa units.
- Being used as supplementary to the Marine Strategy (Honarzadeh, 2004: 24)

The Importance of the Strait of Hormuz from the Viewpoint of Western Countries

After the First World War and with the discovery of oil, the greed of foreign powers increased in the Persian Gulf. The United States and its allies are the most important imperial powers that play in the region. The United States, as well as other international powers, sought to exploit the Persian Gulf facilities, and in particular its "oil" (Sadeqi, 2001: 116) an area that is both geopolitically and geo-economically important. From the point of view of the US policy making system, the country's interests, including the security of moderate Arab countries and the free flow of oil from the region, are threatened by various sources. Hence, the United States will continue its military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean region, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean (Sadeqi, 2001: 128)

An energy expert, says, "if Tehran, closes the strategic Strait of Hormuz, in reaction to the Western oil sanctions, there will be no alternative to compensate it for the West". "The use of longer alternative ways to transport oil will increase transportation costs and cause oil to reach international markets, in the long run, and to a lesser extent" said Peter Sand, Chief Shipping Analyst in the Baltic and the International Maritime Council, to Dow Jones. Below some of the reasons of the importance of the Strait of Hormuz for the West are briefly mentioned:

1. Strait as the only Seaway of the West to the Persian Gulf

The strategic goals of the United States and the West are numerous in the Persian Gulf, and most importantly, the protection of oil resources and shipping lanes and the maintenance of the security of the GCC states, which are American advocates. In the wars, it

is essentially important to maintain the connection with the operational units with their bases. Because interrupting connection means facing a threat of siege and failure and surrender. The base of operating units in the Persian Gulf is located in the Indian and Pacific Ocean, and their connection with the seventh fleet and Diego Garcia's strategic base in the Indian Ocean is through the Strait of Hormuz. To cut off this connection, the easiest way and the most appropriate place is the Strait of Hormuz (Mehrabi, 1998: 264).

Achieving these goals requires a military presence near the site. As a result, the Persian Gulf waters are of particular importance to naval powers, and since the Strait of Hormuz is the only way to transfer navy units from the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf, the geographical features and legal ties of the Strait of Hormuz are relevant for the movement of aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines. In the past few years, naval forces have invaded the Persian Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz two times, at one time, as the Iraq war intensified against Iran, about 70 to 80 battle ships from six countries came to the area under the pretext of security and following Kuwaiti demand for escorting oil tankers. (Hafez Nia, 1992: 438)

2. Oil Artery

The Strait of Hormuz is the world's most important crude oil artery, next to the Malacca Strait, the Suez Canal, Bab Al Mandab, the Straits of Turkey (Bosphorus and Dardanelles), Panama and Denmark. Nevertheless, the Strait of Hormuz alone with a daily transfer of 17 up to 19 million barrels of oil is undoubtedly the world's golden oil pipeline. (www.mehr.news.com) In the past, most of the Persian Gulf oil exports crossed the Strait of Hormuz, which has been declining due to the increasing use of pipelines for oil exports,

at some previous time, most of the Persian Gulf oil exports crossed the Strait of Hormuz, which has been declining due to the increasing use of pipelines for oil exports. But with the security situation in the Strait of Hormuz, exporting oil is much more economic than the pipelines. Because of the high dependence of Western industrialized countries on the Persian Gulf oil Industry, the current and future security of the Strait and the safe transit of oil tankers is a priority for the naval powers. (Mehrabi, 1998: 264)

Projected Plans to Reduce the Importance of the Strait of Hormuz

Oil exporting countries and Western countries have introduced and implemented plans to influence the Strait of Hormuz and to reduce the strategic importance of the Strait, as follows:

A. Change in oil and gas transportation patterns in the Persian Gulf

The idea of multiplying the export routes of oil from the Persian Gulf to various parts of the world was due to the threat posed by the West Industrial countries and the Persian Gulf oil exporters to the Strait of Hormuz, because before the creation of new ports, almost all of the Persian Gulf's oil was transported through the Strait of Hormuz.

B. Changing maritime path for transporting Persian Gulf's oil

Given the political, economic, and strategic importance of maritime path for transporting oil and the security of cargo shipment, it is vital for exporting and importing countries. Therefore, we will briefly examine the most important maritime paths below:

Bab al-Mandab Strait

After going through Strait of Hormuz, tankers will pass Muscat, and if their destination is Europe or the United States they must move through Masirah Island, Ras al-Hadd, the Ras al-Farang, and reach the Gulf of Aden. Bab al-Mandab is located between Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula and Djibouti in Africa, and is the interface between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.

1) Suez Canal

The ship carrying the oil should pass through the Suez Canal after passing through Bab al-Mandab. The Suez Canal is an important and strategic waterway. The Suez Canal is a shortcut for ships departing from Europe to Asia and vice versa, the length of the waterway is nearly 120 miles (193 km). And if the canal is closed, the ships have to travel a 6,000 mile (1600 km) maritime path around the African continent.

(<http://www.tehranrefinery.ir>)

2) Oil Pipes

a. Petro line: An oil pipeline

The lines were dug in Dhahran, east of Saudi Arabia, in 1200 km to the port of Yanbu, west of Saudi Arabia in, along with the Red Sea in 1980. And can pump oil and gas daily by 2 million barrels per day (in the event of an emergency up to 5 million barrels per day). Iraq can also use these pipelines by adding lines.

b. Abandoned Arabic Trance Tube

The Trans-Arabian Pipeline has a 65-year history of exploitation and is one of the oldest pipelines in the Middle East. As the pipeline has a capacity of 300 to 500 thousand barrels per day. This pipeline connects the A-

juaimah port in the Persian Gulf and eastern Saudi Arabia after crossing Jordan and Syria into Lebanon. However, in 1990, Saudi Arabia cut off its oil export from this pipeline because of Jordanian cooperation and supporting Iraq in the First Gulf War. In the current situation, this oil pipeline has been abandoned and inactive, however, this pipeline should be considered as one of the routes of black gold transfer to the Mediterranean Sea region. That is, the Saudi-Bahrain pipeline is currently the only Saudi Arabian active and working international pipeline consisting of four old pipelines of 60 years old that transfer Abu-sfara and Dammam fields light oil to Bahrain with the capacity of 200 to 250 thousand barrels a day. (www.mehr.news.com)

c. Sumed pipeline

These lines are drawn parallel to the Suez Canal and connect the Red Sea to the Mediterranean.

d.4-pipeline of Kirkuk in Iraq to Ceyhan port in Turkey with a capacity of 800 thousand barrels per day:

The transfer of Iraqi oil to Turkey is carried out with two parallel pipelines of 986 and 890 kilometers. These pipelines extend from Kirkuk in northern Iraq to the Yumurtalik in the Ceyhan province of southern Turkey. The first pipeline was launched in 1976, and in 1977 the first loading of the tanker ships took place. The Kirkuk-Yumurtalik oil pipeline contract was extended in 2010 after negotiations between the two sides for another 15 years (<http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news>)

The pipeline for exporting Iraqi oil to Turkey, which exports a quarter of Iraq's oil, has been repeatedly attacked by terrorists; the pipeline has a daily capacity of 1.6 million barrels of oil, and routinely transfers 400,000 barrels of oil a day. Nevertheless, Iraq's oil

pipeline can never be trusted in times of emergency in Turkey, because in recent years the oil pipeline has been repeatedly attacked by terrorists and stopped exporting oil from northern Iraq to Turkey.

e. Iraqi pipeline from Syria to Baniyas port with a capacity of 200,000 barrels per day.

f. Four pipelines have been drawn from Khark and Abadan to Tehran, Astara and Tabriz, where a gas pipeline extends from Tabriz to Bazargan and Turkey. (Rahbar, 2009: 105)

Every day, about 15 to 17 million barrels of crude oil will flow to the global markets through the Strait of Hormuz. "At best, the largest amount of oil that could actually be transported through international oil pipelines could be 4.5 to 5 million barrels," said the US Energy Security Advisor, Paul Domjan, from the opposing organizations to the US oil dependence. "Even so, it's estimated that global markets will need 13 million barrels of crude oil per day. He added "Accidentally, the only oil exporting country that has the best position to bypass the Strait of Hormuz is Iran, which its oil pipelines can be used to transfer oil to the Caspian Sea in the north, and from there using other options to transfer it to the global markets.

(<http://anti666.ir/forum/index.php>)

Another point to note is that the southern Gulf countries export part of their oil products through these pipelines from places other than the Persian Gulf. While Iran supplies 100 percent of its oil to the Persian Gulf and hence, to the Strait of Hormuz. Thus, the Iraq war against Iran and the battle of the Persian Gulf showed that how the Persian Gulf, as a semi-closed sea, could be fragile in opposing hostile situation in the region. Consequently, an attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz will lead to the closure of Bandar Abbas and other

Iranian ports in the Persian Gulf. And in this state of affairs the country will be justified by extreme situations. (Toloui, 1998: 65)

Conclusion

Iran is the largest and most powerful country in the Persian Gulf region, with the largest geographical range and security positions in the area. The Strait of Hormuz, which is located in this area, is indeed, the gateway of Iran to the world and the region, so Strait of Hormuz is one of the most important deterrent factors in the invasion of its borders. A strain that the 90 percent of the Persian Gulf oil export (40 percent of the world's maritime oil trade) as well as the natural gas exports of the Persian Gulf depends on it. However, with the intensification of the West's economic struggle against the Iranian oil industry, the possibility of closing the Strait of Hormuz and bypassing this international waterway in the formal and informal circles of the world has been strengthened, but certainly all scenarios in Western countries to justify the bypassing the Strait of Hormuz in critical situations will not be technical and economical. The alternative maritime path for transporting oil will be challenging and limited in terms of, inefficient, expensive and logistically limited capacity, which will increase the cost of black gold transfer. Also, in the Persian Gulf, tankers pass through routes that are very close to Iranian soil, islands under the control of Iran's navy bases. This high sensitivity and threats of Iran to obstruct the Strait of Hormuz in the event of any military strike against Iran, is now one of the concerns of advanced industrial countries to ensure the security of energy exports. That is, a point to note is that Iran 100 percent depends on oil exports from the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore,

to have a safer port, in the event of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, Iran will have to create a commercial harbor in the Indian Ocean, in addition to providing more security for foreign trade, and also have the ability to develop a possible future. And, simultaneously, could provide a safe access to the transatlantic needs of northern and northeastern countries which do not access the free seas. The connection of the railway and the road with this port is possible due to the networks available in Hormozgan province and the neighboring provinces at the lowest cost. Of course, it should be remembered that having an independent oil policy means reducing the country's dependence on oil exports from the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. The construction of a pipeline capable of delivering oil to the Indian Ocean (Oman Sea), as well as the construction of related terminals, is a matter of urgency for national interests. To reduce national vulnerabilities, it is no other way than to liberate the country's exports (goods and oil) from the relying on the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. Otherwise, the occasional threat of closure of the Strait of Hormuz will not be taken serious by anyone.

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