



**Jeffrey R. Macris and Saul Kelly, eds. *Imperial Crossroads: The Great Powers and the Persian Gulf*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012.**

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The history of the Persian Gulf has always been characterized by conflict. It has been an arena for intervention by several world powers at one time or another. Many countries have defended their economic and political interests in this region, in no small part because it is one of the main oil reserves in the world. Moreover, it is also the largest exporter of oil. Therefore, it can be seen as the "jugular vein" of the global energy system, and so it has become an important area from a geostrategic point of view. The interests of several contemporary powers intersect here, from Western countries to

emerging powers and neighbouring countries; the potential for conflict is easily imaginable.

Through a collaborative effort, the eleven chapters in *Imperial Crossroads* are devoted to the study of the intervention of foreign powers, and their vital interests, in the Persian Gulf. This work also seeks to examine the geopolitical importance that this region represents, including both its geostrategic position and its huge oil resources. Covering a period spanning five centuries, the authors alternately examine the geopolitical importance of the Persian Gulf for four different Western powers, along with their strategic and economic rationales, as well as two emerging Asian powers, China and India. If the purpose of this book is to present in a fine and concise way an explanation for the intervention of major powers into the Persian Gulf, it surpasses its goal by addressing a wider audience of not only political scientists, but also the public at large.

In an effort to provide greater coherence to the whole book, the preface presents to the reader a brief overview of the structure of the book and, in particular, the necessary elements to grasp the geopolitical issues discussed by the volume's different authors. As presented in each chapter, the conceptual aim of the book is to try and comprehend the complexity and evolution of the reasons why and how the great powers intervened in the Persian Gulf. This commonality throughout the book is reflected in the methodological tools mobilized from the perspectives of historical and international relations studies.

The first three chapters provide a historical overview of the intervention of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British in the Persian Gulf between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Moreover, these chapters show how and why each of them entered the Persian Gulf, including the reasons for and consequences of their departure. Rudi Matthews argues that the main objectives which led the Portuguese into the Persian Gulf were essentially Christianity and trade. They wanted to circumvent the Ottoman Empire to establish the spice trade in Asia, and thus their relations with neighbouring states remained rather limited and of a particular nature (5). During their presence in the Persian Gulf, between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Portuguese never tried to expand their commercial operations into Iranian territory.

With the departure of the Portuguese, the Dutch with their trading company Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) became involved in the Persian Gulf, ultimately becoming the dominant European power for about 150 years. According to Virginia Lunsford, the VOC drew inhabitants of the Gulf into a newly emerging capitalist system. However, in 1765, the VOC left the Persian Gulf. This was mainly due to a decrease in profits, largely caused by the instability that emerged in the region after the fall of the Safavid dynasty in 1722. With the departure of the Dutch, the British became a dominant power. Their interests at this time were essentially the promotion and protection of trade, the security of India, and the exclusion of competitors from the Persian Gulf (e.g., to prevent the growth of Tsarist Russia's influence in this region). However, the eventual unilateral decision by the British to withdraw from the Persian Gulf pushed the United States to take over these responsibilities. This was partially to prevent the creation of a power vacuum, but also to prevent the rise of the Soviet Union's influence in the area.

Chapters 4 through 7 are devoted to the analysis of the United Kingdom's influence in the Persian Gulf during the twentieth century, as well as its decision to withdraw from this region. Saul Kelly presents an analysis of the British presence in the Persian Gulf until its withdrawal in 1971, paying particular attention to the impact this decision caused. He argues that the Gulf needs the gamekeepers, led by the United States and assisted by those with vital economic and financial interests, in order to prevent another destabilization of this key region of the world (58-9).

When Nixon came to power in 1969, he was faced with several problems. On the one hand, the US army was involved in the war in Vietnam. On the other hand, the inflation of the dollar significantly affected the US economy. Nixon therefore decided to reduce American military involvement in the world, known as the Nixon doctrine (or the Guam Doctrine). This stated, among other things, that the United States would financially and materially support countries' victims of aggression, but would refrain from direct military intervention. Thus, America made the decision to accord military aid to Iran and Saudi Arabia, who were designated as regional "twin pillars" in the Gulf, delegating its responsibility for safety in the region to those states. Tore T. Petersen argues that by allowing these two states to pay for the military materials necessary to assume their new role in the Gulf, Nixon deliberately broke the

partnership with major Western oil companies in order to increase oil prices and, consequently, the income of oil companies.

The British unilateral decision to withdraw from the Persian Gulf pushed the United States to take on the same responsibilities that the British had assumed during its presence, in order to prevent the creation of a power vacuum, but also to prevent the rise of the Soviet Union's influence in this region. Paradoxically, as J. Clive notes in his study of the role of British intelligence in the 1970s anti-government insurrection in Oman, Britain remained active even after its decision to withdraw from the Gulf. According to him, this insurgency created a significant threat to the Sultanate, whose defeat by pro-communist rebels might have posed a danger to other conservative Gulf monarchies. He argues that the production and use of intelligence during the conflict remained purely a British affair (106).

Chapters 8 and 9 are devoted to the evolution of American interests in the Gulf. These chapters may be of particular interest to those invested in contemporary regional tensions in the Persian Gulf, as well as those who wish to understand how the Gulf became one of Washington's most vital interests. Frank L. Jones argues that it was only in January 1981, five days before the Reagan inauguration, that President Carter issued a coherent presidential directive, which aimed to recognize the Persian Gulf as one of the vital interests of the United States (126-7). On the other hand, after the fall of Iran's Shah in February 1979, the US was left with a single regional pillar: Saudi Arabia. However, as Jason H. Campbell argues, even if this was the central event in the rapprochement between the United States and Saudi Arabia, it was especially the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that motivated President Carter to strengthen relations with Saudi Arabia. In fact, the Persian Gulf was important for the United States even before its official presence after the British withdrawal. The beginning of the Cold War and the emergence of tensions between the two superpowers showed the importance of several geostrategic areas, particularly the Persian Gulf, which were especially important for the United States and its allies.

The book ends with a study of the role of two emerging powers, India and China, which play and will play in the future of the region. Thus, James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara postulate that the Monroe Doctrine is not just a slogan for Indian

political leaders to justify the regional hegemony of India. According to them, these leaders take seriously the lesson of the history of the United States in the Persian Gulf, and try to adapt to the geographical, political, and military peculiarities of India.

Ben Simpfendorfer draws a parallel between the return of China to the Gulf and the historic visit of Admiral Zheng to the Gulf in the 1400s - between China today and China six centuries ago, and their economic success. According to him, China has an objective similar to that of the United States in this region, so it does not need to be considered as a threat. China wants a stable Middle east and free oil exports from it. China's rise is also an opportunity for the Gulf States to re-balance their relations with the United States (183). The author shows also that China's rapid economic growth has increased its dependence on Persian Gulf oil exports. Consequently, China's interest in the Gulf will continue to grow for the years to come.

In summary, this book contains an engaging study of the strategic importance of the Persian Gulf for various world powers over time. Through their contributions, the authors show that several common interests motivated the great powers to involve themselves in the Persian Gulf and to try and maintain their influence in this region. Each of the chapters presents the specific issues, contexts, interests, and devices of actors involved in the Persian Gulf. This historical perspective adopted by the authors helps one to better understand the evolution of geopolitics in the region over the last five centuries. Perhaps even more importantly, the book also helps illustrate why the Persian Gulf cannot be left alone. Namely, it focuses on the Gulf's great economic importance of having one third of the world's oil resources, while also having a fragile social, economic, and political climate; the region could therefore easily become the theatre of a new conflict, as it was in the not too distant past (e.g., two Gulf wars, a war between Iran and Iraq, and the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq).

Through this examination, it will become clear that a lack of power in the Gulf is dangerous, and that it invokes unintended consequences. In the same way, the stability of the Persian Gulf will remain an important focus of western countries' strategies for many years to come, in order to ensure safe and secure access to their oil. A number of direct threats to Gulf oil supplies could lead to a serious short- and medium-term disturbance in the international oil market. Such threats could include military conflicts, the rise of a new regional hegemony, and terrorism, among others.

The authors provide methodically researched, well written, and in-depth information and analyses on a subject that is vast and complex in its scope, giving the reader the necessary tools for further reflection. The authors' notes at the end of the book are valuable assets, and give the reader access to a plethora of additional resources. Even if the analyses are not always of the same magnitude, the authors consistently share a concern for rigour and quality research, requiring a considerable investment of time. Together, they present a clear and comprehensive analysis of how the world's various powers intervened in the Persian Gulf, and how this has affected the region and its evolving political climate today.

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