CHINA AND THE PERSIAN GULF: DYNAMICS OF INCONGRUENT STATE RELATIONS

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Normally, states set up relations with one another in accordance with their national interests. National interest is the cumulative manifestation of specific compulsions arising out of certain factors such as geographical location, historical experiences, ethnic composition, economic needs, political evolution and diplomatic capabilities of a given nation state. With the passage of time and largely because of the changing socio-economic factors and technical advances, inter-state relations have grown increasingly intricate and complex. They have been further complicated by the induction of ideology as a dominant factor guiding the orientation of some states. Ideology can be of wide range and variety stretching from dogmatic faith in religion to a conceptual framework rationally developed through intellectual analysis and dialectical interpretation of socio-economic data. Ideologically-oriented states are not only organized in accordance with the doctrines of a particular theoretical system but they also tend to seek inter-state relations on the basis of their ideology. In such a case, ideology acquires the character of national interest. However, the theoretical dictates of ideology may not always be congruent with the mundane constituents of national interest. That ideology and national interest are two distinct variables is shown by the proven phenomenon that pursuit of the same ideology by two states does not necessarily ensure continued harmonious relations between them. This is so because inter-state system is not monolithic and states do not exist on ideology alone. National interest may cause a cleavage between ideologically identical states as it may draw together states with dispa rate and incompatible systems.

Much of the tension and inconsistencies in inter-state relations in modern times are caused not only by varying state sys-

tems and economic imbalances but also by a failure to draw a clear line of distinction between national interest and ideology. It is not denied that the two may overlap but their harmonization is a problem confronted by many a state. An essential aspect of this phenomenon is the role either plays in international relations. Our subject of study is an instance of the international dilemma in the Persian Gulf which grew perceptible during the decade 1967–1977. The object of the present paper is not to trace the process of nation–building either in the People's Republic of China (PRC) or the eight states of the Persian Gulf but to outline some of the factors contributing to the establishment of relations between the units of two distinct regions in the context of our hypothesis and to examine the dynamics of that relationship.

The period under study is significant in the history of the two actors in terms of their national evolution as well as their bilateral relations. Apart from the facts on either side that China crowned its triumphant emergence as a world power by moving into the permanent seat of the Security Council in the United Nations and the Persian Gulf Sheikhdoms graduated from a status of servitude to sovereign independence almost at the same time in 1971, formal relations were established between China and most of the Gulf states in the same year. Together with the other older littoral states like Iran, Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the newly emancipated states–Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)–occupy an area which is geographically contiguous, geologically rich, strategically vital, economically sound and politically volatile. Historically, in terms of mutual relations except for the links of the legendary "Silk Route' forged between China and the upper states of the Persian Gulf, till recently, there was little actual contact or exchange. To the vast geographical distances were added the wide disparities in socio – economic and historical evolution as factors keeping the peoples and governments of the two regions apart. In the present century, mutual perceptions were blurred by political considerations. Whereas most of the Persian Gulf states, till recently, were politically anachronistic protectorates of Britain, China had completely transformed itself through its ideology and proletarian revolution. It marked the triumph of Marxist ideology

in China which was, and still is, abhorred by the regimes of most of the Gulf states. From the late 1940 s to mid-1950 s, China consolidated its new state system and thereafter embarked on cultivating relations with foreign countries beginning with the states of the Third World. Its ideology dominated its national interest. In this framework, in new China's assessment, the Gulf states with feudal and monarchical societies and regimes subservient to British imperialism appeared reactionary and unworthy of any serious attention. In the Chinese sources of this period, this region was classified as the preserve of imperialism, dismissed with few epithets, and little mention was made of the individual states. Conversely, the first impressions of the regimes in established states like Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia about China, apart from indifference, were of fear and prejudice of the atheistic socio-economic ideology. In either case, national interest did not press for an understanding of the other.

In terms of the global power system, by 1967, China had emerged as an influential and independent centre not only in the Communist bloc but in the world as a whole. The Sino-Soviet split and the Cultural Revolution thereafter, added new dimensions in China's foreign policy. Perhaps, the most notable trend in this field was the new element of pragmatism which essentially meant the emergence of national interest as more dominant than ideology. Consequently, there was a perceptible change in the Chinese approach and the Persian Gulf was one of the areas in which it was manifested. Almost simultaneously, since 1967, the Persian Gulf emerged as a distinct zone of power conflict of both the internal and international variety. The state system in the region is a conglomeration of developing states including an assorted set of micro, proto-national and nation-building states. As such, there are vast discrepancies in the stages of their development as well as their responses to the problem of inter-state relations. The atmosphere of financial prosperity arising out of the oil revenues, although charged with the problem of investment and development, was disturbed by the British government's declaration in January 1968 of its intention to withdraw militarily from the the end of 1971. There was a mixed reaction of hope and nervousness. The eventuality of British

withdrawal was largely interpreted as the creation of a power vacuum and the immediate pressing problem was that of security. The nature of the reaction of each Gulf state was in keeping with the level of its status and power. On the eve of the process of British withdrawal, some states like Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Oman were independent and others such as Bahrain, Qatar and the seven Trucial States were still British Protectorates. As regards power emanating from oil wealth and the weapons system, the positions of Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia were considerable. An intermediate factor was the intra-regional ideological - political conflict and jockeying for positions. There were two parallel layers of ideological strains precipitating occasional tensions between the Arab and Iranian nationalisms and between realism and radicalism. This was a recent phenomenon and out of the two sets Iranian nationalism coalesced with realism and Arab nationalism sustained radicalism. This broad division had its ideological and material nexus with the capitalist and socialist blocs mainly on the basis of national interests of the Gulf states.

All these states, including Iraq till July 1958, had traditionally monarchical-feudal systems. Even though their systemic similarities and ideological orientations pulled them together in the face of radical and revolutionary ideas, their individual interests often conflicted with the result that their intra-regional relations and loyalties frequently fluctuated. At the regional level, even micro states played the game of bargain and power balance in defence of their national interests. This was apparent during the couple of years preceding the emergence of Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE as independent and sovereign states by the end of 1971. Then onwards, each of the Gulf states, with the exception of Saudi Arabia and Oman adopted a pragmatic approach in its dealings with socialist states and their ideology was no constraint. Such an evolution synchronized with a perceptible shift in the Chinese attitude thus facilitating the opening of relations. It may be noted that among the Gulf states, Iraq was the first country which, as early as 1958, had set up formal relations with all the big ideological powers including the PRC and had

initiated a cautious counterbalancing in pursuance of its national interests.[1]

China watched the post – 1968 developments in the Persian Gulf with latent interest and caution. Interest in the region was as much the reflection of its post – Cultural Revolution pragmatic foreign policy as it was the cautious continuation of its phased policy towards the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region initiated in 1955, At first, China's involvement in the region was indirect and chiefly within the framework of its revolutionary anti–colonialist policy. At that time, Chinese foreign policy was sharply ideological which conceived of a world order set up through the intense revolutionary struggle by oppressed masses. Policy statements were charged with revolutionary rhetoric in which national interest was made completely subservient to ideology. In theoretical terms, the WANA region was conceived as one of the several potentially revolutionary areas for struggle against imperialism. China developed its bilateral relations under the cover of the Bandung principles of coexistence. These relations were aimed at promoting the ideology rather than securing strategic and economic benefits.[2] China's ideological involvement in the WANA region began in Algeria and Egypt as it interpreted the launching of the independence struggle by the FLN as a people's war and considered President Nasir as the leader of a genuine Arab nationalist movement.

China entertained hopes that the independence and nationalist movements in the Arab countries could be geared up as people's liberation movements. This approach had two facets:

1 The Chinese papers gave prominent display to the news of the Iraqi republican revolution in July 1958 hailing it as a great victory of the Arab people, Shortly after the revolution, the Chinese Foreign Minister, Chen Yi, on 16 July informed his Iraqi counterpart of the Chinese government's decision to recognize the Republic of Iraq. In his reply, on 18 July, Premier Quasim conveyed to Prime Minister Chou En-Lai Iraq's recognition of the PRC. On 25 August 1958, the two governments announced their decision to exchange diplomatic envoys.
Peking Review, 21(22 July 1958), p. 5, 19; ibid, 27 (2 September 1958), p. 21.

2 For a detailed study of this aspect, see T. Y. Ismael, *The Middle East in World Politics: A Study in Contemporary International Relations*, (New York, 1974), pp. 153–154.

uncompromising struggle by the Arabs against Western domination, and much more crucial was the point of Arab people's struggle for emancipation from "reactionary' regimes in their states. China was soon disappointed and disillusioned in its expectation on both the counts. The reasons were clear. In the first place, the Arab govermnments set up relations with China not out of attraction by the Chinese ideology but because of their own need to use this relationship for their own political weightage. The point arises out of the fact that there was no spontaneous recognition of the PRC by any Arab state from 1949 to 1956. Even after the Nasir–Chou camaraderie displayed at the Bandung Conference in April 1955 the first Arab recognition of the PRC was delayed by President Nasir till May 1956. The 13–month period was spent by Nasir in weighing the pros and cons of the move on his country's national interest. Moreover, it was also a case of hoping to bargain with the Western countries on the issue. An Egyptian paper explained the delay as a "diplomatic courtesy" to the West.[3]

Further, even the radical Arab governments refused to subscribe to the ideological contents of the Chinese approach and there was open breach by 1959[4] when, finding the Arab radicals "reactionary"in its estimation, China attempted to take sides with the Arab communists and encourage ideological dissent The Arab government saw it as a violation of the five principles of co–existence by which China had sworn and it caused suspicion. Militarily and financially, China could offer little comfort to the Arabs. Logistic problems and vast distances prevented any appreciable supply of heavy weapons which China, in fact did not have to offer. Even though China signed numerous trade and aid agreements with various Arab governments their to-

3 *Al-Jamhouriya* (Cairo), 17 May 1956.

4 After the formation of the UAR in February 1958, President Nasir ordered the dissolution of the Syrian Communist Party. This was resented by the Chinese. They indicated their anger in September 1959 by permitting Khalid Bakdash, a Syrian Communist leader who had fled from his country, to attack the UAR government in a rally in Peking. President Nasir, on the next day, withdrew his *Charge d'Affaires* from Peking and closed the Chinese Consulate in Damascus. The Chinese retorted by laying siege to the Egyptian Embassy in Peking.
Mohammed Hasanein Heikal, *The Cairo Documents* (New York, 1973), 310.

tal volume was much less than that offered by the Western or Soviet bloc of countries. Politically, China was not in a position to offer any help to the Arabs in their main problem-conflict with Israel-since it was not a member of the UN and had no influence, not even a channel of communication with Israel. Finally a weighty factor which made the Arabs more reserved towards China was the Sino-Soviet rift. More than being interested in analysing the respective merits in the ideological conflict, the Arabs looked at the pragmatic aspect of the utility of either communist giant to their own advantage. And, from this angle, there was no doubt in any quarter that the Soviet Union was more useful and helpful to the Arabs. The Arabs' preferences came to the surface during the preparations for the proposed second Bandung-type conference in 1965.

That marked the end of the first phase of Chinese involvement in the WANA region and the beginning of the next one. This was a major qualitative shift. By this time, the Chinese felt that their persistent appeals for revolution were being lost on the Arab leadership and that there was a need to focus on a specific issue in order to regain the initiative.[5] In the Arab world, the Palestinian movemens took a crucial turn in September 1964 when the Arab Summit Conference blessed the creation of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as a distinct body responsible for spearheading the Palestinian people's struggle. The Arab states' decision which was made in defence of their national interests was caught up by the Chinese to be exploited for their ideological purposes. Knowing that it was a people's problem which also appealed to the wide Arab masses China immediately began to cultivate the PLO. The objective was to create a people's liberation force out of the Palestinians. What the Chinese overlooked were the facts that most of the Marxist-Maoist requisite factors for a people's protracted war were non existent in the Palestinian situation. The Palestinians were attracted to the Chinese emotionally, not ideologically, in hope and not by conviction. The PLO leadership even at that time could hardly be considered as genuinely proletarian or revolutionary. The Chinese tended to feed them with militant

5 R. Medzini, "China and the Palestinians: A Developing Relationship", *New Middle East*, 32 (May 1971), pp. 34–37.

ideology rather than adequate military or material aid. Moreover, it was also clear that even at the initial stage, the Chinese indicated their intention to use the Palestinians towards settling their scores with the Soviet Union and the Arab regimes which had let them down. The Chinese leaders made it clear that crushing of right wingers and reactionary leaders in the Arab world was a task much more important to the cause of revolution than was the reconquest of Palestine.[6] A real turn came in the wake of the June 1967 war when out of the agony, humiliation and frustration arose the Palestinian guerilla movement. This, along with the general tense situation in the Arab world, posed a serious threat to the American and Soviet positions. Almost simultaneously, civil war broke out in the southern Arabian peninsula. In this extremely emotionally charged environment, China's advocacy of armed struggle by the people had a tremendous appeal and China found a role to play. By exploiting the situation, China hoped to score over the USA, the USSR and the discredited Arab regimes at the same time. Therefore, it intensified its efforts. However that yielded little success because most of the Chinese support was moral and propagandistic and there lurked a basic difference between the Chinese and the Palestinians. Moreover, the Soviet Union made a reassessment of the Palestinian movement and it made amends by opening up to the guerillas. Gradually, the Palestinians' emotions cooled and even their radical guerilla groups began to see reason and moderation as the means of their salvation. By stages they agreed to a political rather than a military solution to their problem. It was a clear defeat of the Chinese efforts and expectations. By implication, the Palestinians rejected the Chinese theory of the relentless and protracted war of liberation. Only the extremist elements of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP) echoed the Chinese doctrine. Both lost

6 This could be gathered from the conversation Chou En-lai had with Ahmad Shuqaairy during the latter's visit to China in March 1965. Some of the points made by Chou were: China could not supply all the arms required because it was not rich; liberation movements should be self sustaining; inter-Arab factions; difficulty in getting to the Palestinians; Soviet duplicity and lack of sincerity. For excerpts from the verbatim conversation (in English) see Ismael, n. 2, pp. 229–232.

the edge with the mass of Palestinians. This was one more case wherein the Sino-Soviet rift proved detrimental to China. The Soviet Union again succeed by virtue of a pragmatic rather than a doctrinaire approach. Pragmatic and power considerations weighed more with the Palestinians as against mere ideology.

Finding themselves outwitted by the Soviets and the Palestinians the Chinese effected a third shift. In the new phase, the point of focus was shifted to the Persian Gulf where a new fluid situation was developing since 1968. Simultaneously there occurred a marked change in the style of the Chinese management of their foreign relations. This process was the outcome of two important decisions at home. In the post-Cultural Revolution period, Chinese foreign policy appeared to be in the process of "turning out"[7] and getting pragmatic. Secondly, anti-Sovietism not only persisted but from 1968, the Chinese veered towards a stance that in between the USA and the USSR the latter was their principal enemy.[8] Consequently, China grew more attentive to, and solicitous of, the USA. The perceptible opening of the channels of communication between China and the USA were noticed by certain states, including some in the Persian Gulf, who had extra-national interest constraints in their attitude towards China. Thus, in the early 1970's the now national interest-guided foreign policy of China and the non-ideological interests of many Persian Gulf states coalesced and heralded a period of otherwise unexpected relationships. What where China's objectives and how was the course of Chinese involvement in the Persian Gulf? The most apparent objective, a spillover of the second phase of ideological thrust was to cultivate revolution through subversion. By the mid-60s, China was disillusioned with the existing Arab regimes and its efforts to reach the Arab masses over the heads of the government leaders had annoyed the regimes even in the radical countries like Iraq and Egypt. A further factor eroding the Chinese influence in the Arab East was the Sino-Soviet breach which

7 Daniel Tretiak, "Is China Preparing to 'Turn Out?': Change in Chinese Levels of Attention to the International Environment", *Asian Survey*, vol. 11, 3 (March 1971), pp. 219–237.

8 Linda D. Dillon, Bruce Burton, and Walter C. Soderland, "Who was the Principal Enemy?: Shifts in Official Chinese Perceptions of the two Super Powers, 1968–1969", *Asian Survey*, vol 17, 5 (May 1977), pp. 456–473.

was reflected to the Chinese detriment in the Arab communist parties. So China engineered a shift and paid more attention to the southern Arabian peninsula where a revolutionary situation suiting China's version of the revolution was developing. At the back of the Chinese mind was the strategic location of the area commanding not only the approach to the Red Sea but also abutting on the Horn of Africa and contiguous to the Persian Gulf. The embryonic signals of radicalism in the Gulf during the early sixties had attracted the attention of the Chinese.

So, in this broad perspective, the Chinese established immediate and material contacts with the National Liberation Front of South Yemen which consolidated itself as the ruling party in the newly established People's Republic of South Yemen (PRSY), (27 November 1967).[9] China already had a base to operate in North Yemen which China had established diplomatic relations in 13 January 1958. The Chinese assessment of the upsurge in South Yemen differed from that of the Soviet Union which was sceptical of the situation being ripe for a proletarian revolution and the adoption of "scientific socialism". Nonetheless, the NLF revolutionary objectives in south and southeastern Arabia verging on the Persian Gulf coalesced with china's ambitions in the area. The Dhofar Liberation Front, formed in 1963, which initiated the armed struggle in the western province of the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman in June 1965 served as a catalytic agent crystallizing a fusion of the efforts of the NLF of South Yemen and China. Thus, a new revolutionary organisation, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf (PFLOAG) was created at a Congress at Himrin in 1968. As the name of the body suggests its area of operations not only Oman but also the entire Gulf. China readily agreed to provide the Front with its version of ideology and warfare, expert personnel, guerilla training in subversive activites as well as military and material aid. As regards the Persian Gulf, it was reported in 1969 that China had allocated "millions of dollars" for work in this area in the hope of setting up a "beachhead to control entrance to the Red Sea and to establish new strong points of communication line which would play an important ro-

9 Diplomatic relations between China and the PRSY were established on 31 January 1968.

le in the event that the blockade of the Suez canal is lifted". China assiduously tried to foment opposition to the existing governments in the Gulf area.[10]

Chinese ideologues thought that an identical revolutionary situation as was built up in South Yemen would develop in the Persian Gulf along with the British military withdrawal. Their conclusion was based on the Maoist interpretation of such apparent facts as the presence of a considerable politically conscious intelligentsia, a rising segment of proletariat, a substantial volatile Palestinian refugee community and an equally important underprivileged migrant population, and the existence of numerous intra-regional divisive factors such as political asymmetries, tribal feuds, ethnic and sectarian differences and border disputes. It was also thought that sudden richness would create conflicting loyalties. Certain "progressive" and "nationalist" postures and programmes adopted by some of the rulers as those of Iran, Kuwait and Bahrain, their increasingly assertive and independent positions on the production, distribution and pricing of oil and growing adherence by the Persian Gulf regimes to the concept of non-alignment, which was welcomed as a shift from alignment, were construed by the Chinese as positive indications of their open-mindedness and readiness to evaluate other states, policies and approaches in terms of genuine national interest. However, the deductions drawn by the Chinese out of a set of facts were *a priori* incorrect as their knowledge about the intricate variables in the Gulf was lop-sided or incomplete. What the Chinese failed to take into account was that in spite of the liberal and eclectic exterior, which accommodated a wide spectrum of progressive, nationalist and secular trends, the people, by and large, were traditional in outlook and approach and loyal in faith to the regimes which were fairly strong and stable. The greatest point of difference was that quite unlike the limited resources of South Yemen, a majority of the Persian Gulf states were rich due to oil. The national riches percolated perceptibly to the lower levels thus creating a natural popular interest in the *status quo* and orderly development. Quite a substantial number of detractors of the regimes were co-opted thro-

10 D. Ben Dok, "China and the Arab World", *Current History*, vol. 59, 349 (September 1970), p. 150.

ugh financial incentives into the system. In such a setting, instead of receptivity, there grew repulsion for radical, revolutionary or subversive ideas and movements.

However, the Chinese were quick in making an intelligent and dispassionate assessment of the conditions and prospects in the Gulf as well as in southern Arabia. By 1970, they rightly concluded that it was fruitless to support subversive movements with a dubious future.[11] It was a complete *volte face* and it synchronized with realism and pragmatism which characterised China's new foreign policy posture after the Cultural Revolution. Now, China moved to cultivate amicable relations with the sovereign and emerging independent, no matter even if incompatible, states in the Persian Gulf. It was a tactical move but in order to camouflage its opportunistic change, China began to talk about the solidarity of the Third World states and to support their rightful demand for sovereign control over their natural resources. While dropping the radical and revolutionary movements, China had an eye not only on catching the eye of the Gulf regimes but also on exposing the Soviet Union as the protagonist of subversion and dissent. Along with supplanting the Chinese influence in the northern states of the Arab East, the Soviet Union had countered and blunted the Chinese hold over South Yemen as well as the PFLOAG.[12] Thus, the initial Chinese objective of fomenting revolution underwent a total transformation and ended up with Soviet-baiting.

That became the second objective of China. It was a continuation of the Sino-Soviet rivalry in the wide WANA region in the wake of their rift. The competition grew so tense and intense that it became difficult to find out clearly which between the two was baiting whom. A clear pattern emerged in the sixties wherein the Soviet Union and China competed for friendship of the local regimes in which the former attracted a majority. A similar phenomenon could be found at the level of the communist parties. In order to counteract the Soviet influence at the governmental and party levels China, in mid-

11 A. Yodfat and M. Abir, *In the Direction of the Gulf: The Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf* (London, 1977), p. 74.

12 Abbas Amiri, ed., *The Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean in International Relations* (Tehran, 1975), pp. 294–5.

60 s picked up the Palestinian issue which cut across all political and ideological divisions. China took the initative in cultivating the Palestinian guerilla movement which, at first, was ignored by the Soviets but, later, in the 70 s, the Soviet attitude on this issue was revised-the main motive being to erode the Chinese influence. It was a notable example of a phenomenon wherein China moved in a certain direction and the Soviet Union followed it to counter and obliterate its influence. The course of the Chinese and Soviet moves in southern Arabia was similar and so were their policies and approaches in the Persian Gulf region.

In terms of the Soviet and Chinese knowledge about the area, formulation of policy, its implementation, and the responses of the local states one can find great many points of resemblance. The objective of anticipating the other and countering the moves of the adversary was also apparent. The prime handicap of both the communist giants was that their knowledge about the peoples and problems of the Gulf states was inadequate and often erroneous. The main reason was that except for Iraq, Iran and Kuwait (in case of China only Iraq till 1971) they had no base to operate in the lower Gulf states. Their contacts were confined only to the periphery of the Gulf and till the 60 s their interests in the Persian Gulf were peripheral. Therefore, their policies were often hesitant, inconsistent and even contradictory.

In the context of the Sino-Soviet rivalry, unlike the attempt in the sixties, the Chinese campaign of Soviet-baiting was qualitatively different in the seventies. Primarily, because of its entry into the UN, China acquired the sense of international respectability equal to the other Big Powers including the Soviet Union. The Soviet activity was considerably circumscribed in the new decade so far as the Arab-Israeli zone was concerned. It evolved an improvised policy towards the Persian Gulf region. An apparent contradiction was that from 1970 onwards, it began to patronize the subversive and revolutionary movements and at the same time solicited the friendship of the established and emerging regimes. Quite interestingly, Soviet involvement with the radical movements materialised at a time when China decided to extricate itself from them. Whereas the Soviet motive was to

supplant the Chinese influence over such movements built during the sixties, the Chinese shifted to assume a posture of respectability and branded the Soviets as instigators and supporters of subversion in southern Arabia as well as the Persian Gulf. The Chinese decision to open up with Kuwait and Iran in 1971 was primarily aimed at countering the Soviet pressures on the Gulf through Iraq. As regards the newly declared sovereign states of Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE, the anxiety to attract them was uniform on either side. China and the Soviet Union were at one in supporting the Iranian view that the affairs of the Persian Gulf should be managed by the littoral states of the waterway without any foreign interference. Since the USA had delegated the task of guarding the Gulf to Iran and agreed to provide arms for this purpose, the formula in actual operation applied to the other extra-regional powers like the USSR and the PRC. Both clung to it in order to counteract the other. Whereas the Soviet Union disapproved of the Iranian armament China supported it as "just and understandable", thus going along with the USA towards blocking a possible breakthrough by the Soviet Union in the Persian Gulf. Even though China failed to get a foothold for itself in the region, it succeeded in building itself as a counterpoise to the Soviet Union. Simultaneously, it tried to deepen its involvement in the Gulf through other avenues such as its strategic location, oil resources and rich trade market.

China's objective in acquiring an interest in the Persian Gulf due to its strategic location was a remnant of the Chinese approach to the WANA region where apart from establishing diplomatic relations with most of the Arab states China had not made much headway in gaining any influence, if not control in the area. The new situation of a "power vacuum" supposed to be developing in the Persian Gulf after the British decision to withdraw their military presence necessitated a reappraisal of their attitudes by regional as well as extra-regional powers. Since by this time China had graduate to the Big Power status, it gave a fresh look to its strategic interests in the area. However, they were too amorphous and far-fatched as the Persian Gulf was far off from China and in no way could it be considered vital for the defence of the core region of China. Nor did China have any client state, base or permanent commercial and

financial investments in the Persian Gulf or its periphery to protect. Chinese strategic interests were, therefore, of ad indirect nature aimed at checking diverting or counter-balancing influence of its antagonists and adversaries. In the Chinese perception, they seemed to be the USSR and the USA in that order. Whereas with the USA, even though the main issue for some time continued to be Indochina, there were ripples of rapprochement, greater pressure was felt by August 1968 of the Soviet pressure on China. The apprehension was aggravated by the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia and border clashes in the spring of 1969 nearer home in the Ussuri region. In this context, the Chinese decided to enter the Persian Gulf with the aim of diverting the attention of the superpowers and thereby relieving pressure on its border and the peripheral region.

When the Chinese began cultivating the WANA countries speculation grew that apart from political and strategic considerations, China was also interested in the oil of the region. In the early commercial agreements with Egypt and Algeria oil was mentioned as one of the items of trade. This interest could have two motives: to curtail oil supplies to countries considered hostile to China, and to ensure increasing supply of oil to itself. In both respects, China's objectives appeared too far fetched. First, it was an impossible proposition to disrupt the WANA oil supplies to traditional destinations under Western monopolistic companies because they were very resourceful politically, financially and technologically. Being a new entrant and with little know-how of oil exploitation and marketing, it was a naïve ambition of China. So, this aspect of China's interest could be dismissed *ab initio*. As regards the second aspect, it is difficult to arrive at a definite conclusion because the oil information about China is vastly divergent. In China itself, like many things, data on oil is a state secret except when publicity would serve a national purpose. Even the geographical location of the major Taching oil fields was kept secret till it was disclosed by a Chinese source in August 1974.[13]

According to one Western study[14] China, during the 1950s imported most of its oil needs from the Soviet Union, Indonesia

13 *People's Daily* (Peking), 30 Ağust 1974.

14 Sevinç Carlson, "China's Urgent Need for Stability in the Middle East", *New Middle East*, 36 (September 1971), pp. 25–31.

and Iran. Even though between 1958 and 1962, indigenous oil production was estimated to have increased by 50–60 per cent, China still imported over three million tons of oil. In subsequent years, China felt an additional pressure as in the wake of the Sino-Soviet breach, imports from the Soviet Union dropped to just half a million tons. During 1963–65 Chinese indigenous oil production fluctuated though, in 1963, China claimed to be "self-sufficient in the main in oil" and in 1966 its total output of crude oil was estimated to be between 10 to 13 million tons and consumption about 12.5 million. During the convulsions of the Cultural Revolution, oil production dropped by about 15–20 per cent. Premier Chou En-Lai made a rare disclosure to Edgar Snow that in 1970 China's oil output was 20 million tons[15] and a couple of years later, in the thick of the energy crisis when the whole world was craving for oil, Chou told Foreign Minister Ohira of Japan that China's oil output in 1973 had reached a record 50 million tons.[16] Further, an innocuous looking writeup in a Chinese journal conveyed the message of increased oil exploitation in China. Without giving the figures it said that during "the last ten years or so" rich oil deposits had been discovered in many parts of China. Thus, it went on, "the vigorous oil industry met the increasing needs of the national economy in quantity, quality and variety". It also stated that since the Cultural Revolution the average increase of crude oil production was 69,9 per cent.[17] It was also reported that in 1974 China produced 65 million tons of oil.

The figures given by Chou exceeded the most optimistic estimates. The Taiwan *Studies on Chinese Communism* which normally does not minimize the Chinese communist achievments hesitated to accept these figures and wondered whether it was true or part of an "oil foreign policy".[18] In point of time, the statements of Chou and other disclosures had relevance with the contemporary international and political scene. Chou's first statement synchronized with the major diplomatic offensive

15 *New York Times*, 25 March 1971.

16 Masayoshi Ohira visited China in January 1974. *Summary of World Brodcasts* (SWB), (London), FE/4493/i, 7 January 1974.

17 *China Pictorial* (Peking), 10 (1974), p. 2.

18 *China News Analysis* (Hong Kong), 976 (11 October 1974), pp. 4–5.

which China had launched in the Persian Gulf and it coincided with the final stage of negotiations for mutual recognition and exchange of diplomatic missions between China and Kuwait. At this time, China attempted at striking a note of cordiality not only through an emotional appeal for the Asian, African and Latin American solidarity but also declaring itself as a fellow oil-producing country which supported "the just struggle of Kuwait Government and people against the imperialist oil monopolistic groups headed by the US."[19] Simultaneously, the Chinese, in their national pride, did not like to give the impression that they were seeking relations with the Gulf states in pursuance of their need for oil. The 1974 disclosures of the Taching oil fields and China having become a major oil producing country should be seen as part of the Chinese orchestrated theme of evolving a solidarity of the oil-producing states of the Third World to which China declared itself to belong, in their struggle against the imperialists for better terms for their resources including oil. This could well mean a Chinese attempt to be admitted as a member of the OPEC. A second objective of the Chinese in talking vocally about their oil was to underline the fact that whereas the oil-producing states of the Persian Gulf had shaken the position of most states China was not affected by their action. Thereby, the Chinese hope to reserve their bargaining position. A third explanation for China's deliberate disclosures about their oil resources could be that it was a slight at the Soviet Union whose oil production had reached a saturation point and it had already began to import Arab and Iranian oil.

According to a report oil production in China in 1976 had reached the level of 85 million tons and the Chinese Minister for Petroleum and Chemicals claimed that plans were underway to build ten new fields as big as the one at Taching which is believed to account for about 40 per cent of the production. On this basis, a Japanese research institute estimated that China's oil output may, by 1985, equal Saudi Arabia's current annual production of 400 million tons and it may cross the 450 million mark by 1990. If the estimates are correct then the world energy picture during the 1980s would be interesting when both the USA

19 Editorial in *People's Daily* (31 March 1971) welcoming the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Kuwait.

and the USSR are expected to become importers of large quantities of oil,[20] and along with the Persian Gulf states, China would emerge as a major oil producer. Such being the case, it is not unreasonable to visualise that China would appear as a competitor of the Persian Gulf states. That would surely introduce elements of tension and erode whatever goodwill China has created in this region since 1971 reducing it to square number one. In view of its characteristic farreaching calculations behind its calculated moves in the Gulf, China must have given due thought to such an adverse logical development. If China was confident of its vast oil resources it would not have shown so much deference to the incompatible regimes of the Gulf. Secondly, if the facts were correctly reflected by the figures China would not have continued its oil imports from Iran nor would it have recently signed an agreement with that country to import 3,000,000 tons of crude oil.[21]

Thus, it may be rationalised that even though China's indigenous oil production has improved it continues to import oil in order to meet its increasing domestic consumption which is growing as the base of Chinese economy is shifting from coal to oil. Moreover, China has to maintain its programme of exports of oil mainly to Japan and Thailand in order to earn the much-needed foreign exchange. From this angle, China's interest in the Persian Gulf oil seems understandable. The interest becomes acute because, at the moment, the Gulf states are willing to sell oil to China but the situation might tighten in the 1980 s when the USA and the USSR along with its COMECON allies are likely to become larger importers of the Persian Gulf oil and if China does not nurture its interests now it might find itself completely plugged off from the area. Hence, the pragmatic interest of China in cultivating cordial relations with the oil producers of the region well in advance. China's style of approach indicates that it is keen to avoid the image of a state dependent on oil from the Persian Gulf.

Like that of oil, China's approach to trade with the Persian Gulf states has been a positive goal not governed by ideological

20 Yodfat and Abir, n. 11, pp. 5–10, 78, 129–30.

21 The agreement was signed by a Chinese delegation during a visit to Iran in August 1977. *News from Iran* (Bulletin of the Press and Information Service, Imperial Embassy of Iran, New Delhi), 8 September 1977, pp. 6–7.

considerations. There has been an increasing universal realisation since the sixties that trade, as against aid, builds abiding inter-state relations. The record of China's trade and aid programmes in the WANA region in general is neither consistent nor impressive. This pattern is reflected in the Persian Gulf region as well. There are certain basic geographical, political, economic and psychological reasons for this. Even though historically, in ancient times considerable trade was exchanged between China and some of the West Asian countries through the legendary "Silk Route", by the 15 th century this system disintegrated[22] and in modern times the two regions developed a new geographical pattern of trade. The West Asian region was sucked into the European /American commercial system and China isolated itself from international trade and commerce. When in the mid-fifties, China decided to rediscover lost links and establish relations with the WANA countries, the overall socio-economic-political environment on both sides had undergone vast transformation and China carried the handicap of being a late entrant. It initiated its aid and trade programme but apart from being initially selective due to ideological considerations and financially not very sound at home it found itself unable to compete with the richer countries in their volume of aid /trade and also it could not satisfy the expectations of the recipients who were otherwise receptive to Chinese overtures. Whereas in the WANA region China used both aid and trade as instruments of influents of influence, in the Persian Gulf it depended on trade alone. That was a pragmatic decision to promote the national interest. The issue of aid could have involved ideological constraints on either side and on this aspect the Gulf states could have shown a negative attitude. Moreover, China's international trade was small, WANA's share in it was smaller and that with the Persian Gulf was just a fraction.

Yet, in late sixties, operating within its limitations, China made a determined bid to enter the Gulf market and its record over a period of years shows a consistent stabilization of trade relations. Significantly, even before China established diplomatic relations with Kuwait and Iran and extended unilateral recognitions to Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE in 1971, considerable

22 Amir Taheri, *Kayhan* (Tehran, weekly international edition), 7 October 1972.

volume of trade was carried out between China and these states. An analysis of the trade statistics reveals a certain pattern. In case of the lower Gulf states like Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman the statistics, though sketchy and incomplete, reveal that during 1971–75, China quietly built up its trade relations with these countries. In every case the volume of imports from China was more than the exports thus turning the balance of trade in its favour. The volume of trade showed an upward increase in every successive year. The most significant fact was that Oman, where Sultan Qaboos had declared in April 1972 that his country would have nothing to do with China, carried out fairly flourishing trade consisting mostly of imports from that country. In 1973, the value of its imports was over one million Omani rials and it more than doubled to over OR 2.6 million in 1975. Another notable success was in Qatar where the value of trade, mostly imports from China, rose from Qatari Rials 1.3 million in 1972 to QR 24 million in 1975. In the same year, non-oil Qatari exports to China were of the order of QR 10.3 million. A notable fact was that in the list of the exporting countries to Qatar China occupied the 14 th place and among the importers of Qatari goods, China stood at the 6 the position.[23] It is interesting to observe that even though Saudi Arabia banned all trade with China in 1968, a fair amount of consumer goods imported by Bahrain continued to find their way into Saudi Arabia.

The pattern of Chinese approach and trade with the upper Gulf states –Iraq and Iran– is different. In the first place, China's trade relations with these countries are relatively old and stable, having begun in the lats 1950 s. Secondly, since Iraq and Iran are semi-industrialized states and their resources are diverse, their needs wide and they have a variety of products to offer, China's trade relations with Iraq showed an increasing degree of exports along with some fluctuations in the seventies.[24] The relationship also reflected Iraq's predicament arising out of the Sino-Soviet

23 For statistics of the lower Gulf states' trade with China see *Middle East Economic Digest*, 7 November 1975, p. 34; 14 November 1975, p. 34; 23 January 1976, p. 33; 11 Joune 1976, p. 40; and 26 June 1976 ("Oman: Special Report"), p. 35.

24 *Middle East Economic Digest*, 30 October 1970, p. 1262, 1301; 6 June 1975, p. 28.

competition for its loyalty. Iraq's ability to manipulate was considerably circumscribed by its closer commitments with the Soviet Union. Since Iran did not have any such constraint its trade relations with China showed wider scope and prospect.

Commercial contacts between Iran and China in recent decades can be traced to 1968 when China showed its interest in buying the Iranian crude oil and petroleum products. However, in spite of the Chinese being "very responsive", trade did not pick up mostly due to Iranian reservations and alignment with the USA for its security. However, during the early sixties, in the midst of the thawing of the Cold War and as a part of its quest for an "independent national foreign policy", Iran revised its attitude towards China. Relaxation was reflected in 1964 when the Iranian government lifted restrictions on purchase of goods from, and exports to, China. Thereafter, till 1971, although not "official', trade exchanges became regular. In the year of the normalization of relations (1971) whereas the "official' trade was worth about $ 10 million, the "unofficial" exchanges were estimated to amount to nearly $ 20 million. During that year, China was the fourth largest buyer of Iranian goods and the twenty–second leading exporter to Iran.[25] Apart from the rising volume and the regularization of trade, a significant development was that in the wake of the visit by a delegation of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Mines (November 1971) it was reported that the idea of the two countries' banking institutions having direct contacts in order to finance trade was mooted.[26]

A further improvement in the overall commercial relations was the signing of a Five–Year Trade and Payments Agreement on 8 April 1973. It special features were trade would be on the barter basis with the Iranian Rial as the sole unit of currency for accounting; the volume of trade was substantial and unprecedented being worth about $ 70,4 million; and the share of non–traditional industrial items was 70 per cent and that of the traditional items 30 per cent.[27]

25 *Echo of Iran* (Tehran), 30 July 1973.

26 *Kayhan* (weekly international edition), 8 April 1972.

27 Under this agreement, the total trade volume would be six times more than the figures of 1971–72 and 80 per cent more than those of 1972–73. The in-

China, thus, did not have much difficulty in breaking the ground in the Persian Gulf in its favour. What may be described as a sort of problem with most of the states were the specifics of trade such as the goods to be bought and sold. Neither China nor any of the Gulf states, particularly the lower ones, were industrialized to a level so as to have a self-generating demand for now raw materials or finished goods. The directions of trade, in the main, were different. The economies of the two units were, by and large, agricultural, consumptive, and mostly competitive. The chief problem was the identification of, and agreements on, the items of trade. As such, in case of states other than Iran and Iraq, most of the articles of trade were traditional such as live stock, foodstuffs, tea, tobacco, grain, textiles and China-ware. China supplemented its exports with new consumer goods like plastic products, battery cells, torches, toys and stationery. It is rather strange that oil was not included in the items of exports from these countries. Reasons for it could be that except for Kuwait, the resources of Bahrain and Qatar were relatively limited, they were exploited by the Western companies, and the regimes, under the watchful influence of Saudi Arabia, were reluctant to export oil to China. Iran developed an interest in trade with China as it found a vast potential market for its medium industrial products. Among the lower Gulf states, Kuwait added petrochemicals and Bahrain sold aluminium to China, China confronted a psychological obstacle. The people of the Gulf are more fond of the external trappings of wealth and comfort and the Chinese goods appeared too ordinary for them. In some cases, when they went in delegations to China, the utilitarian form of the Chinese society and economic structure did not impress them much.

As a by-product of more frequent exchanges of high-level delegations, mainly with Iran, certain other related points of

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dustrial goods exported by Iran were mini buses, trucks, scooters, TV sets, refrigerators, chemical fertilizers, sodium carbonate, agricultural machinery, detergent, sulphur. The traditional items were cotton, wool and chromite. Iranian imports from China included textiles, paper, stationery, athletic goods, antimony, tin, iron and steel equipment goods. *Kayhan* (weekly international edition), 21 April 1973; NCN-A, 8 April 1973, *SWB*, FE/4268/A4/1, 11 April 1973; *Middle East Economic Digest*, 13 April 1973, p. 420 and 420 and 20 April 1973, p. 448.

interest emerged. For example, during the visit of Empress Farah Pahlavi to China (September 1972) agreement was reached on the setting up of a shipping line between the Persian Gulf ports and China.[28] Another outcome was that Iran offered credits and its technical knowhow for the expansion of China's petrochemical plants in the eastern provinces as well as the oil refinery near Peking.[29] It was felt in Tehran that as Iran had considerable experience in establishing technical and economic relations with countries of different social systems in the East as well as in the West, China was keen to learn from it.[30]

A distinct point about the Chinese involvement in the Persian Gulf region is that unlike in most of the WANA countries, China did not offer financial or technical aid.[31] As regards the former, the attitudes of both were identically not in favour of it though for different reasons. Primarily, China was not sound financially and, as a result of its earlier experience in some of the Arab countries it was disillusioned with economic aid as an instrument of foreign policy. The Gulf states were mostly rich and resourceful and the less fortunate among them did not, for ideological reasons, like to be subvented by China. However, they did require technical aid and advice in their development process. This was a possible field for the Chinese to exploit as, usually, they registered their presence through deputing their experts and technicians in such projects as road building, hospital construction, health centres, schools and setting up of co-operatives for small and medium-scale industries. But, the Gulf regimes were, in general, adverse to permitting the physical presence of the Chinese aid personnel in their societies. So, no Chinese-aided projects were mooted in the Gulf and the only case of a joint venture agreed upon by a Gulf country with China was that of Iran and it was to be implemented in a third country. Under it, Iran placed an order with China for the establishment of two textile mills in Pakistan.[32]

28 The shipping service began operating on 29 January 1973 when an Iranian ship left for China carrying 3, 300 tons of cotton. *Middle East Economic Digest*, 16 February 1973, p. 185.

29 *Kayhan* (weekly international edition), 30 September 1972.

30 Tehran broadcast on 29 November 1974, *SWB*, ME/4770/D/1, 2 December 1974.

31 Iraq was an exception.

32 A protocol to this effect was signed in February 1975. *Middle East Economic Digest*, 21 February 1975, p. 12 and 23 May 1975, p. 13.

Thus, in the field of trade and aid the measure of Chinese success was partially limited to the former alone. Even though the trade relations picked up and fairly stabilized it could not be said that China had acquired any degree of influence or a foothold in any of its trading partners in the Gulf.

Having analysed China's objectives and fields of interest in the Persian Gulf, it is easy to evaluate its diplomatic offensive in the region and the response of the regional states thereto. The hypothesis that this relationship grew when ideology was made subservient to pragmatism and national interest will further be tested. It has already been noted that among the Persian Gulf states, Iraq was the first which advanced towards China and with which China cultivated relations. But, this relationship was more a part of China's strategy in the WANA region. As such, it bore marks of inter–Arab power struggle as well as the impact of the Sino–Soviet rift. Apart from promoting bilateral state relations, China tried to cultivate its ideological influence by patronizing a faction of the Iraqi communists. However, in the chequred course of developments since 1958, Iraq grew somewhat isolated in the inter–Arab politics, and in foreign relations and ideological affinity it chose a pro–Soviet stance. Consequently, its relations with China were just correct, not cordial, though strained at times.

As regards the other states of the Gulf, China's premium on ideology was an effective constraint on either side for some time. At first, proceeding on a revolutionary premise, China displayed its peremptory zeal for abetting and patronizing the guerrilla activities towards bringing about a revolutionary change in the Gulf. But its ideological direction and material aid confronted much international and local resistance. Making a realistic reassessment China, from 1970, overhauled its whole approach to the Persian Gulf in which the dominant aspect was a readiness to evolve stable relations with the established regimes without any prejudice to their character. It was a complete *volte face* in China's foreign policy and establishement of diplomatic relations with Kuwait and Iran and China's unilateral recognition of Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE in 1971 were its positive manifestations. These developments might look sudden but they were in fact the outcome of a gradual and quiet evolution

of certain trands on either side. The contributory factors were as much the changing international environment as the pressures of national interests on either side.

In Kuwait, as far back as 31 January 1964, the Minister of Foreign Affairs had declared that his country had no objection to establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC and, in June 1965, a Chinese delegation had visited Kuwait to look into the possibilities of broadening the official exchanges.[33] Kuwait's positive policy tovards the PRC was a reflection of the government's efforts to build an image of "progressive" and "open – minded" country. Relations with the PRC, it was hoped, will not only neutralize opposition of radical elements at home but it would also provide leverage to deal with Iraq. For China, it was a mistake to ignore a country which was willing to be friendly and did not demand any financial doles. On the contrary, if properly cultivated, Kuwait's riches could be attracted for investment in China and prospects of a rich market for its goods was a powerful incentive. In Kuwait, China could hope to promote its anti–Sovietism in the context of initial Soviet hostility towards Kuwait and its relations with Iraq.[34] Behind the scene moves for bilateral relations picked up in March 1971 and a joint statement on the 22 nd announced the decision of the two governments to establish diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level.[35] Even though not absolutely necessary, both sides rationalized their action and it was interesting reading. The *People's Daily*, in an editorial, made a belated comment that since their independence in 1961 the people of Kuwait "have been opposing

33 *Chronology of Arab Politics*, American Universith of Beirut, (Beirut), 1964, 1965.

34 Soviet Unions hostility towards Kuwait was evident in the fact that being critical of its regime when Kuwait proclaimed its independence in 1961 and applied for UN membership, the Soviet Union vetoed it. Secondly, when Kuwait's conflict with Iraq came before the UN the Soviet Union sided with Iraq.

35 The communique underlined the desire of the two to promote bilateral relations in all fields in accordance with their common interests. Kuwait acknowledged "the noble stand of the People's Republic of China in supporting the Arab struggle against imperialism and zionism" and recognized "the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China" Text of the joint statement broadcast by NCNA on 29 March 1971, *SWB*, FE/3648/A 4/1, 31 March 1971.

US and Israeli aggression and supporting Palestinian people's just struggle" and so now "the Chinese people support the just struggle of the Kuwaiti government and people against the imperialist oil monopolist groups headed by the USA". The editorial added a new dimension by linking the establishment of relations with "the historical trend of strengthening unity, friendship and co-operation among the peoples of the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America" and reiterated the five principles of co-existence as the basis of future relationship. This was a repetition of the Chinese approach to the Third World states during the fifties and reiterated now to reassure the Kuwaiti regime and to obliterate the misgivings of the other Gulf states towards China. Earlier, a Kuwaiti daily had called for an exchange of ambassadors with the PRC as it "had repeatedly supported the Arab cause in contrast to Taiwan".[36]

Formalization of relations between China and Iran was much more significant. It is a classic example of the domination of national interest in bringing two idologically incompatible regimes together. There is a history behind Iran's fluctuating attitude towards China but it took a positive turn after 1969.[37] Various explanations may be adduced for it. With the US–USSR detente, Iran was gripped with the fear of being left alone and the possibility of being let down.[38] Iran's opening up to China was a repetition of its policy of third power balance. By deciding to befriend China, the Shahanshah could not only take the wind out of the sails of his detractors he could as well drop a bone of contention between the Iranian communists. Normalization of relations with China could be an additional proof of the "independent national policy" *(Siyaset-e Mustaqill-e Milli)* initiated by the Shahanshah. Fear of the Soviet Union was a common factor which drove Iran and China in the direction of each other. Iran's increasingly assertive posture promised an effective im-

36 *Ar-Rai al-Am*, 2 March 1971.

37 In a statement in New Delhi on 4 January 1969, the Shahanshah expressed his belief that for the sake of its universality and effectiveness China should be admitted to the United Nations. For an analytical account of Iran's attitude to China's admisson to the UN over the years see Shahram Chubin, *Iran and International Organization: The Use of the UN on Selected Issues*, 1960-1971, (Tahran, 1976), pp. 11–20.

38 Sepehr Zabih, "Iran Today", *Current History*, (February 1974), p. 66.

pediment to the Soviet designs in the Gulf and, given China's known determination to counter the Soviet influence, co-ordination between the two was a logical corollary. Further, since the Soviet Union had cultivated Iraq and was also keen to reassure Iran of its friendship, China felt disturbed at the prospect of a Soviet breakthrough in the Persian Gulf as thus the Soviet Union could link itself with the Indian Ocean where it already had its presence and influence. In order to prevent such a thing from happening, China stepped in to exploit Iran's fears.

The process of Irano-Chinese rapprochement was hastened by the softening of the US attitude towards China and the slackening of its watch over allies favourably disposed towards that country.[39] The establishment of relations between Kuwait and China precipitated the move and, in the following month, the Shahanshah sent (in April 1971) his twin sister, Princess Ashraf to probe into Chinese leaders' mind and to finalize the normalization of relations. The process continued during the visit of another member of the royal family, Princess Fatimeh. Ultimately, on 16 August 1971, the Iranian and Chinese Ambassadors in Pakistan signed the document of bilateral recognition and agreement to establish diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level.[40] It was pertinent that in this first official agreement whereas Iran recognized the PRC as the "sole legal government of China, the latter acknowledged Iran's prime role in the Persian Gulf and supported "the Imperial Government of Iran in its just struggle to safeguard national independence and state sovereignty and protect its national ressources." Following recognition, Chou En-lai publicly praised the Shahanshah as a "leader striving for the uplift of oppressed masses" and China officially characterized Iran's nationalistic oil policy as a "just struggle to safeguard its national independence and sovereignty."

39 Even though Iran had is own compulsions, it was hesitant to act lest it might annoy the USA. Iran did not like to take any chance and opened its cards on China after President Nixon's visit to Peking in July 1971. It was an instance of extra caution.

40 Text of the statement in Wizaret-e Umoor-e Kharjeh, *Kulliyeti dar Bara-e Ravabet-e Daulat-e Shahanshahi-e Iran ba dual-e hauze-e masooliyyat Idare-e Haftum Siyasi*, (Idare-e Intisharat vo Madarik, Tehran, Mehr, 2535), pp. 13-14; NCNA broadcast on 17 August 1971, *SWB*, FE/3765/A4/1, 19 August 1971.

More patent proof of China's pragmatic policy towards promoting its national interest in the Persian Gulf was its unusual decision to offer unilateral recognition to the three feudal and incompatible states of the lower Gulf–Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE. On the eve of the proclamation of their independence, Premier Chou En–lai sent identical messages to the rulers of Bahrain and Qatar offering felicitations and recognition and hoping for abiding friendship between the Chinese and the people of these states[41]. An NCNA broadcast noted the Qatar goverment's intention to establish "friendly relations with all the peoples and all countries". It went on to magnify that the people of Qatar had waged "protracted struggles against British and US imperialist enslavement and control".[42] The case with the UAE was slightly different. President Zayd bin Sultan an–Nahiyan sent a message to Prime Minister Chou En –lai on 3 December 1971 informing him of the establishment of the UAE on the previous day. He went on to declare his government's adherence to the Charters of the UN and League of Arab States. Expressing his belief in the necessity of peaceful co–existence between all nations and international co–operation in all fields, President An–Nahiyan indicated his governments's willingness to strengthen "all relations" with the Chinese people and government.[43] It seems that as with the Soviet Union, the UAE President was ready to exchange diplomatic missions with China. This might have been aimed at strengthening his state's position *vis–a–vis* Saudi Arabia in the context of the border dispute over the Buraimi oasis and against Iran in the wake of occupation of the island of Tamb and Abu Musa. However, he was dissuaded from doing so by his powerful neighbour in Saudi Arabia as well as some of his co–patriots in the UAE.[44] Responding to President An–Nahiyan's message, Chou hopefully offered recognition to the new–born state.[45] China maintained its initiative

41 The messages to the rules of Bahrain and Qatar were dated 20 August 1971 and 10 September 1971 respectively, NCNA, 20 August 1971 and 10 September 1971, *SWB*, FE/3768/A4/1, 23 August 1971 and FE/3784/1, 11 September 1971.

42 NCNA, 3 September 1971, *SWB*, FE/3783/A4/1, 10 September 1971.

43 Text of messages by Fresident An-Nahiyan and Presimer Chou En-Lai in *SWB*, FE/3861/A4/1, 10 December 1971.

44 Yodfat and Abir, n. 11, p. 73.

45 Chou's message was dated 8 December 1971, NCNA, 8 Decembe4 1971, SWB, FE/3861/A4/1, 10 December 1971.

by sending official messages on the occassion of the National Days of these states and at the same time adding its own wishes for their victories in "the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggle".

The most notable and interesting points about these recognitions were that they were offered unilaterally by China without any reciprocal gesture by the Gulf states in question and they were not followed by the establishment of diplomatic relations. The non-receiprocity from these states was partly due to the overbearing influence of Saudi Arabia and partly because of the Chinese support to the PFLOAG and other radical organizations in the area.[46] China was not alone in being snubbed in this manner as the Soviet Union also faced a similar ignominy with Bahrain and Qatar.[47] Saudi Arabia and Oman are the only two states left in the region which have remained diplomatically averse to China. While there is no evidence to show that China made any public overtures to Saudi Arabia, it is well known that the latter repeatedly turned down the friendly approaches by the Soviet Union for establishing diplomatic relations. Saudi Arabia is excessively allergic to the Soviet Union and China as, according to the Saudi kings' belief, communism is an anathema to Islam. Sultan Qaboos is not so dogmatic and he took the rational stand that his government would have nothing to do with the Soviet Union and China because both fomented rebellion in his province of Dhofar. The Sultan's attitude might change now as, according to his claim, rebellion and subversion have been stamped out in his country. Evidently, China will have to have patience and allow some more cooling off period.

China's well-planned moves won some dividends and a measure of its success was reflected in the voting in the UN General Assembly on the issue of its admission in 1971. Excepting Saudi Arabia all other Persian Gulf states which had earlier voted against the PRC now either supported its candidature or abstained from voting.

46 The true orientation of these states was apparent when on the morrow of their indepedence, all the three states signed treaties of friendship and co-operation with Britain.

47 The Soviet Union also unilaterally offered recognition to Bahrain and Qatar on 25 August 1971 and 10 September 1971, respectively.

In China's involvement in the Gulf, a two-way process could be deciphered. It was a response to the post-1968 developments in the area and after 1971 China became more active in cultivating its influence. A parallel development was the emergence of the Persian Gulf as a distinct zone of international conflict and its inter-linking with the increasing international rivalry in the Indian Ocean. The events in the two zones interacted with each other. The situation in the Gulf was fluid as the littoral states debated over the regime in the region and there was scramble between the super-powers for influence not only in the Persian Gulf but also in the Indian Ocean. In the overall strategic picture, there was a cross-cutting of the national interests of the Gulf and extraregional states. Among the latter group, besides the two super-powers, China and India were also interested powers. China made a deliberate bid to establish itself as a possible object of counter-balance and it had to reckon with India as well.

China's strategic interests in the Persian Gulf region appeared more pronounced in the wake of the developments in the Indo-Pak subcontinent through 1971. In the new power balance in South Asia, India emerged as a dominant actor and the Soviet Union sustained its position. Almost at the same time, Iran acquired predominance in the Gulf and it enjoyed the blessings of the US to wards which the Soviet Union was sceptical. Historically, there has been an strategic interdependence between the Persian Gulf and South Asia, particularly the Indian subcontinent. Whereas in the post-1971 polarization, developments in South Asia affected the developments in the Persian Gulf, in the post-1973 energy crisis the oil-rich states of the Perso-Arab waterway acquired an unprecedented influence in South Asia where India alone was in a relatively better position to withstand the pressure.[48] During the crises of both the years, the Soviet Union and the USA played a latent role in pushing their influence through their dependable states in the two regions. If the Soviet Union added its weight through its treaties with India (August 1971) and Iraq (April 1972) the USA countered it by building up Iran which with Pakistan's dismemberment had acquired a central strategic position between India and Iraq.

48 For an interesting study on the subject see Howard Wriggins, "Changing Power Relations between the Middle East and South Asia", *ORBIS*, (Fall 1976), pp. 785-803

In this emerging international scene, Chinese involvement and India's intensification of its relations in the Persian Gulf were interesting parallel developments.[49] For a time till 1973, particularly during the heat of the Indo–Pak war, it seemed as if China, while bracketing India's emergence with the extension of Soviet influence, thought of cultivating Iran as a counterpoise. The high watermark in this policy was the famous statement of the Chinese Foreign Minister, Chi Peng–fei, made in Tehran in June 1973.[50] In the first place, *inter alia*, it expressed total support to Iran's arms build–up and its conception of the Gulf security. Two vital aspects of China's foreign policy were implicit in it. Support for the Iranian rearmament was an approval of the Nixon Doctrine and the US policy of delegating its role of guarding the Gulf to Iran. It also meant an acceptance of indirect US presence in the area. Simultaneously, it was a rebuttal to a Soviet role in the region as suggested by the treaties with India and Iraq.

Secondly, Chi justified Iran's arms build–up as a "necessary measure" against subversion and expansion in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean and disowned that China was abetting subversive groups in the Persian Gulf.[51] More than indirectly strengthening the recent CENTO decisions to deal with the problem of subversion, this changed Chinese strategy was aimed at exposing and putting the Soviet Union in the dock. It was a desperate bid to get out of a situation wherein China was overshadowed by the Soviet Union.

The third point implicit in Chi's statement was the support to the maintenance of the security of the Gulf "by *all the littoral*

49 Since 1971 India devoted greater attention to the Persian Gulf. This was evident not only in the decision to set up independent diplomatic missions at ambassadorial level in all the newly independent states of the area but also in the frequent exchange of high-level delegations and the intensified activity in the fields of trade, joint ventures and commissions, and export of Indian expertise.

50 Chi Peng-fei and his party arrived in Tehran on 14 June for a friendly visit to Iran at the invitation of the Iranian Foreign Minister. The Chinese media did not carry details about the statement. Only bare fact were reported. *SWB* FE /4323 /A4 /1, 18 June 1973.

51 *Echo of Iran*, 17 June 1973. Reinforcing Chi's statement the following day, an article in the *People's Daily* praised Iran's role in protecting the Persian Gulf from colonialism and subversion and defending the region's stability against foreign powers. *People's Daily*, 15 June 1971.

states without any foreign interference" (Emphasis added)[52]. While on the one hand, it meant support to the Iranian contention it could also serve as a subtle brake to Iran's monolithic role and show China's equal respect for other states of the area. Such a posture could also be soothing to the states on the Arab side of the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia and Oman who were patently suspicious of China and latetly sceptical of Irans' pretensions of leadership in the Persian Gulf. Thus, in the long run, China could hope to win greater response and warmth in the so far intractable lower Gulf states.

Since Iran was suspicious and cautious of the Soviet Union and India, China tried to capitalize on these sentiments and, in its totality, Chi's statement was as much directed at India as it was against the Soviet Union. Yet, displaying political maturity and seeing through the Chinese game, the Iranians took the Chinese support with a pinch of salt and did not fall into the trap of antagonizing the Soviet Union or India.

The Chinese attempt to queer the pitch for India in the Persian Gulf had little chance of success. Even though India's decision to diversify and deepen its relations with the Gulf states coincided with the Soviet and Chinese involvement in the area, its position and policy were different. India had the advantage that its contacts were age-old and it had its diplomatic and consular relations with all the states of the Persian Gulf even when some of them were British protectorates. Unlike the Soviet Union or China, India had a well defined and fairly understood policy of friendship for all at no body's cost. This was soon recognized and accepted by Iran and China and, as a result, inspite of India appearing as a sort of counterweight to the Iranian position and as a competitor of China for markets in the Persian Gulf, these facts did not exacerbate either country's bilateral relations with India. In fact, from 1973 onwards, Indo-Iranian relations grew so thick as never before and the tempo of Sino-Indian rapprochement was not disturbed but actually led to the normalization of relations in April 1976. The change in Iranian and Chinese attitudes towards India was partly due to the fact that along with its enhanced politico-military power, explosion of a nuclear device in May 1974 had added up a new dimension

52 *Kayhan* (weekly international edition), 23 June 1973.

to India's overall position. Thereafter, both the countries, for their own reasons, seemed to have thought of the possibility of cultivating closer relations with India with a view to neutralizing the Soviet influence, if not turning India away from the Soviet Union. Although not so clear, though plausible, about China, it can be said with greater degree of conviction that one reason for Iran betting closer to India was the hope of weaning it away from the Soviet Union and diluting India's relations with Iraq, thereby eroding some base of Soviet influence in South Asia as well as the Persian Gulf.[53]

The convergence of Iranian and Chinese objectives in encouraging India to take a different position from that of the Soviet Union was reflected on two specific issues. Both supported the proposal to make the Indian Ocean a zone of peace. The central objective in the proposal was to insulate the region against super–power presence. In actual operation, it applied to the Soviet Union alone as the US influence was to be maintained through Iran and China had conceded this plan. On the latter point, India had its difference although it was at one with Iran and China in pressing for a zone of peace in the Indian, Ocean wherein super–power rivalry would be obliterated. In this formula, both the super–powers were bracketed together and it could be interpreted that India was as much opposed to the Soviet as it was to that of the American pressence.

Next, China and Iran felt India's reservations regarding Brezhnev's proposal for the Asian Collective Security and visualized the issue as one more focal point wherein they could sustain India's position with a view to countering the Soviet Union. Whereas China openly rejected this proposal and India procrastinated, Iran, under the fear of Soviet pressure, was publicly courteous in going along with it but with certain reservations.[54] It was anxious neither to isolate China on this issue nor to ratify the Soviet hegemony in Asia. Iranian position was clarified by Prime Minister Hoveyda during his visit to Moscow in August 1973 when he stated that Iran endorsed the Soviet proposal

53 Shahram Chubin, "Iran between the Arab West and the Asian East", *Survial*, vol. 11, 4 (July/August 1974), pp. 177–9.

54 Iran's conditional support was contained in the joint communique issued after Kosygin's visit to Tahran in March 1973.

provided it was accepted by "all countries of the (Asian) continent". Iran's rider was meant to include China and India who were opposed and hesitant on the issue and thereby neutralize the Soviet advances.

By, 1975, China added a new dimension to its policy in the Persian Gulf. It was formulated in the wake of the successful termination of the protracted conflict in Indochina. Now, China could devote more attention to the other areas. The new policy was more palpable and positive. It was thought out in the context of the new international situation in which the super–power detente, the energy crisis, conflict between developing and industrialized countries over control of resources and search for a new international economic order were the dominant issues. The fallacies in China's new policy appeared on the following lines. The super–power detente was bogus and it was detrimental to the interests of the developing countries. The emerging confrontation between the raw material producing developing countries and the industrialized states over the reshaping of the international economic structure provided a common cause to uphold and necessitated unity among the developing countries which constituted the Third World. China was a developing country and it belonged to the Third World. It supported the sovereign rights of sovereign states not only of national independence but also of unfettered control over national resources which were being constantly challenged by the two super–povers. Hence the imperative need for unity among the Third World countries, including China, for their just struggle against "imperialism and hegemonism" – euphemisms for the USA and the Soviet Union. This became a constant theme, almost an obsession, of the Chinese foreign policy and it was applied to the Persian Gulf as well and repeated on successive occasions. It was reintegrated during the visit of the Iraqi Vice–President, Taha Muhiuddin Ma'ruf, to China in July 1975.[55]

China tended to interpret the contemporary developments in the Persian Gulf accordingly. It may be stated at the outset that the Chinese versions were motivated and they did not necessarily reflect the accurate nature of events. An NCNA corres-

55 For excerpts from the speech of the Chinese Vice-Premier, Teng Hsiao-ping, see NCNA broadcast on 4 July 1975. *SWB*, FE /4948 /A4 /1–2. 7 July 1975.

pondent's article and a commentary in the *People's Daily*, for example, truly reflected the offical thinking.[56] The basic assumptions in both the features were that there was a mass upsurge against the super-powers' "interfence, agression and contention" which were the root cause of the unrest in the Gulf, that struggle against these had united the Gulf Satates, and that it was part of the struggle of the Third World states against the imperialistic and hegemonistic designs of the super-powers.[57] Without caring to discriminate in the complex state policies on oil and collective security, China flatly supported them as manifestations of the "anti-imperialist struggle".

China's motive in such an approach was to project itself as a third force to be relied upon by the Third World. Quite obviously, none of the Persian Gulf regimes was taken in by the Chinese palpable but loaded phrases because they were not based on objective and disinterested conclusions.

It may be concluded that during the decade, 1967-1977, China's involvement in the Persian Gulf acquired a concrete form. Initially, it was a continuation of China's political and ideological interests and objectives in the wide WANA region. Since evolved an independent interest in the Persion Gulf when following the British government's decision to pull its military presence from the area, the region emerged as a distinct zone of power conflict. At first, China's objectives were ideological and its methods were revolutionary and subversive. This was an improvised approach as it was based in inaccurate conclusions partly due to the challenge by the Soviet Union. By 1970, China evolved a new style of foreign policy and within this fresh framework, it reassessed the conditions in the Gulf realistically and adopted a national interest-based pragmatic approach. Proceeding on the new line, it found prospects in cultivating cordial and benefical relations with the Persian Gulf governments because of the strategic location, oil resources and trade potentialities of the region. Ideological and political incompatibilites

56 For extracts from the article on 12 July 1975 and the commentary on 28 August 1975, see *SWB*, FE/4955/A4/1–2 and FE/4994/A4/1, 30 August 1975.

57 Broadcast on 20 December 1975 and 8 June 1976, *SWB*, FE/5100/A4/2, 6 January 1976 and FE/5232/A4/2–4, 12 June 1976.

were no more the constraints on China's relations with the Persian Gulf states. China's presence in the Gulf was coupled with a dual process *vis a-vis* the Soviet Union in which one challenged and countered the other. Along with this aspect of the Sino-Soviet conflict China, after the termination of the Indochina war in 1975, devoted greater attention to Persian Gulf. It had to contend with the covert and overt challenges by the two super-powers. In order to meet these, China began to harp on the theme of the solidarity of the Third World states. In the context of the energy crisis, confrontation over control over raw materials and demand for a new and equitable international economic order, China lent its support to the measures of the developing countries including those of the Persian Gulf. It tried to strike a community of interests between its own struggle and that of the Gulf states against "hegemonism and imperialism". However, the governments in the Gulf were extra wary with China and they shuddered to fall in line with that country although they realized its utility in warding off the pressures on them. Even though the measure of China's success in acquiring a degree of influence, if not a foothold, in any of the Persian Gulf states was marginal, it succeded in establishing an equation which the two super-powers had to take into account. China's breaktrough in the Gulf, though limited, is as much an instance of the triumph of pragmatism over dogmatism as it is a case of the reconciliation between national interest and ideology in its foreign policy.