

## CONFLICTS IN THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ: IMPLICATIONS TOWARDS OMAN AND IRAN <sup>©Σ</sup>

MOHD RIDZUAN MD ARIFFIN\* AND NORAINI ZULKIFLI†

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### ABSTRACT

The Strait of Hormuz is a vital global oil chokepoint that links the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. It contains narrow international shipping lines in the territorial waters of Iran and Oman, and the narrowest point is only two kilometres wide. Nevertheless, major powers have devoted their interest in the Strait especially the United States of America. This research has been conducted to analyse the factor contributing to the conflict in the Straits of Hormuz and its implications for Iran and Oman. The objectives of this research are: i) to identify the importance of the Strait of Hormuz; ii) to examine the causes and impacts of the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz for Iran and Oman; and iii) to analyse the potential cooperation between Iran and Oman in handling the dispute in the Strait of Hormuz. This research has used qualitative approaches and secondary data were the main sources. The concepts of power and national interest have been used to explain the issues. The findings of this research are i) the strategic location of the Strait of Hormuz has become a factor of conflicts as it is the SLOC to economic activities and strategic purpose; ii) the conflicts in the Straits of Hormuz will cause a decline of economic activities and the Straits to become a battlefield to both countries; and, iii) both countries should use diplomacy to settle their crisis which if escalates, will bring disaster to each side.

**Keywords:** Iran, Oman, Persian Gulf, SLOC, The Strait of Hormuz.

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## **KONFLIK DI SELAT HORMUZ: IMPLIKASI KEPADA OMAN DAN IRAN**

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### **ABSTRAK**

*Selat Hormuz merupakan kawasan yang mempunyai banyak minyak global di mana ia penting untuk menghubungkan Teluk Parsi dan Teluk Oman ke Lautan Hindi dan Laut Arab. Ia merupakan laluan perkapalan antarabangsa yang sempit di perairan wilayah Iran dan Oman selebar hanya dua kilometer. Namun begitu, kuasa besar telah menumpukan kepentingan mereka di Selat itu terutamanya Amerika Syarikat. Penyelidikan ini telah dijalankan untuk menganalisis faktor konflik di Selat Hormuz dan implikasinya terhadap Iran dan Oman. Objektif penyelidikan ini adalah i) mengenal pasti kepentingan Selat Hormuz; ii) mengkaji punca dan kesan konflik di Selat Hormuz terhadap Iran dan Oman; dan iii) menganalisis potensi kerjasama antara Iran dan Oman dalam menangani konflik di Selat Hormuz. Penyelidikan ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan data sekunder menjadi sumber utama. Konsep kuasa dan kepentingan negara telah digunakan untuk menjelaskan isu-isu tersebut. Dapatan kajian ini ialah i) lokasi Selat Hormuz yang strategik menjadi faktor konflik kerana ia merupakan SLOC kepada aktiviti ekonomi dan tujuan strategik, ii) konflik di Selat Hormuz akan menyebabkan kemerosotan aktiviti ekonomi dan Selat menjadi medan perang kepada kedua-dua negara; dan iii) kedua-dua negara harus menggunakan diplomasi untuk menyelesaikan krisis mereka seolah-olah ia semakin memuncak, ia akan membawa bencana kepada setiap pihak.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Iran, Oman, Teluk Parsi, SLOC, Selat Hormuz.*

## Introduction

Throughout the history of the Middle East, conflicts, aggressive events, disturbances, and other destructive actions have occurred, and the situations have had huge impacts on the regional and global economy. The conflicts in the Persian Gulf implicate regional and external factors. Regional factors include littoral states, whereas external factors involve other countries interested in oil trade in that area. Further, the Strait of Hormuz, situated at the end of the Persian Gulf, essentially plays an important role in the global economy and regional stability (Mauldin April 17, 2017). The conflicts in that area centre on the Strait of Hormuz, which has a geostrategic value to influence oil trade (Krotz 2011).

Geographically, the Strait is a narrow sea line. The flow of the oil products through it consists of averaged 21 million barrels daily. It constitutes 21% of global petroleum liquids consumption (Barden June 20, 2019). Several attacks on the oil tankers and downed drones involve Iran and the US (Gambrell September 17, 2019). The damages to oil tankers include those from Norway, Japan, and the United Kingdom. The Strait connects the Littoral States of the Persian Gulf to the other parts of the world through the Indian Ocean. It separates two countries, Iran and Oman and slightly with UAE (Cai *et al.* 2019). All crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipping routes pass through the Strait. It becomes a critical chokepoint that can reflect global economic stability and sustainability. Any aggressive event gives rise to various matters, including high crude oil prices and marine and shipping insurance (Letzing July 19, 2019).

The recent conflict occurred between the United States of America (USA) and Iran just after the 2015 nuclear agreement ceased to exist. The US resigned from that agreement in May 2018 and imposed unilateral economic sanctions on Iran (Katzman November 15, 2019). In retaliation, Iran shot down the US drone suspected of spying on Iranian territory in the Strait of Hormuz (Withnal and Hall 2019). Other events include the attacks on several internationally owned oil tankers, including British-owned vessels, in July 2019 (Kirkpatrick and Specia July 19, 2019). The conflict escalated immediately after Iran's Revolutionary Guard seized Stena Impero, a British-flagged ship (Kirkpatrick and Specia 2019). From Iran's perspective, the incident was a retaliation against the British when it previously seized Iran's oil tanker at Gibraltar because of suspicion that Iran had violated EU sanctions on Syria (*Reuters* May 13, 2019). This article aims to analyse the factors of the conflict in the Straits of Hormuz and its implications for Iran and Oman.

## Methodology

This research has been conducted based on qualitative methods derived from secondary data. The printed data stem from books and articles from the National Defence University of Malaysia, the National Defence Educational Centre's and the Ministry of Defence's library. The authoritative references include such as written Ramazani (1979; 1986) and Razavi (1997). The secondary online data have been collected from several websites, which provides a collection of global energy analysis containing information about

energy production, stocks, demand, imports, exports, and prices. The data have been analysed based on qualitative content analysis. This research has examined the documented information gathered through library research collection only.

## Literature Review

### *The Importance of the Strait of Hormuz*

Throughout history, the oil industry development in the Middle East, especially the coastal states in the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz has shown significant importance for global economic progress. Several scholars have written about the importance of the Strait Of Hormuz from various aspects. Ramazani (1979) discusses the importance towards global economics, which consists of the setting of the Strait, the economic interest of the Western World, the Littoral States, the Socialist States, and the international oil highway. Additionally, Al Sheddi (1991) explains the strategic significance of the Strait within the national and international arena. The discussion focuses on the legal and political problems posed by Iran and Oman, regarding the overlap claims by Iran and Oman over their territorial sea legal right to the Strait of Hormuz for both countries. He also discusses the littoral states' apprehensions in political, economic, legal, and global community concern.

The potential threat to the environment in the Strait has been affected by the spilled over of oil into the waters during the Iran-Iraq war 1980s. It is vital to maintain a secure environment by conserving the waters from pollution to preserve the habitat of various animal species. Talmadge (2008) reiterates the importance of economy through the Strait, which involves crude oil movement from the Gulf countries to their clients globally using the sole passageway; the Strait of Hormuz. She also relates the potential implication posed by Iran if the conflicts escalate and Iran can close the Strait as a countermeasure. This article focuses on the possible outcome of the disputes and highlights Iran's perspective on the threat posed to the region and global economies.

Habibi (2010) states the important role of Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council member countries, or GCC, which include the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. It discusses the importance of Iran-GCC diplomatic relations regarding their regional and international economic situation in which Iran has the countermeasures to neutralise the multilateral and unilateral economic sanctions. This situation affects the actions of Iran in the Straits of Hormuz. However, Asgari and Hajat (2021), mentions the importance of the geographical factors and their impact on the government's policy, especially on Iran- Oman relationship. He also discusses the roles played between Oman and Iran in economy, strategy, military, security and connectivity. This paper primarily focuses on the Iran-Oman relationship concerning the Strait of Hormuz. The geographic and economic importance posed by the Strait is a single passageway for oil transportation that has become the world's most important oil transit chokepoint.

Al-Kaabi (1994) has explained the critical global chokepoint posed by the Strait, geographical importance of global chokepoint as regards to the global economic that become interdependence and integrated by the Strait. The implication of the conflict, if it occurred, could result in the closure of the sea passage by Iran. The closure of the Strait disrupts maritime traffic, which leads to the disruption of global oil trade.

Almajdoub (April 25, 2016) analyses the importance of the Strait because of the geostrategic interest shared by Oman and Iran. This reflects the balance of power in the

Gulf region, especially in the Strait of Hormuz. Besides, this research analyses the conflicts and cooperation between Iran and Oman and between other countries concerning the national interest of the countries involved and the concept of power. These two aspects or concepts shape their foreign policies and portray the importance of the Strait of Hormuz.

Al Zubair (2017) discusses the significance of Oman as an intermediary between Iran and the US. Oman, throughout history has been characterised as friendly by the US and Iran because of its neutral and pragmatic policy approach. The role of Oman in the Strait of Hormuz is as important as Iran in destabilising the conflict between Iran and the US and other countries interested in the Straits, including oil merchants, oil producers, shipping establishments, and insurance companies.

### *The Causes and Impacts of the Conflicts in the Straits of Hormuz*

Gambrell (September 17, 2019) also discusses the impossibility of Iran closing the Strait as all of its oil production travels through the Strait. If war is to happen, it is because of the US involvement in the Strait. The US aircraft carrier has been seen to enter the Port of Oman. Iran feels that US pressure on the country by using sanctions can lead to the closure of the Strait. Meanwhile, Samore (December 17, 2015) outlines the significant implication of any armed conflict in the Gulf area that threatens global oil supplies. Historically, the Gulf has experienced oil supply interruption as a result of war, namely the war between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the US intervention in Iraq in 2003. These wars affected the flow of global oil production, increased the price of crude oil, and put pressure on other oil-producing countries to cope with extra oil production to stabilise the global economy.

On July 13, 2012, *Al Jazeera* explored the potential repercussions of Iran's conflict in the Strait of Hormuz. This conflict resulted in a deadlock for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on two critical fronts. The first is the possible blockade of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran, and the second is the challenge faced by GCC countries in navigating the delicate balance between adhering to sanctions imposed on Iran and, at the same time, compensating for the shortfall in Iran's oil production due to these sanctions. The implication of the blockade and the alternative solutions to the issue have also been discussed, reflecting the GCC. Besides that, Cordesman (December 30, 2012) states scenarios that constitute threats in the Strait of Hormuz. These scenarios are also the causes for Iran to pose a danger to the US and the Gulf countries, as well as any country backed by the US. He writes about sanctions on Iran by the United Nations and also unilateral sanctions by the US. It deals with the sanctions on financial assistance for Iran and the naval embargo. The other scenario is that Iran was suspected of hiding its uranium enrichment and also obtaining some highly enriched material.

Additionally, Cordesman and Lin (February 27, 2015) writes that the threat posed by Iran can create a global impact, especially on the US. This is because of the global interdependence on the stable flow of energy export from the Persian Gulf oil producers. He discusses the potential attacks by Iran in the Strait on matters only to intimidate or put pressure on the oil producer countries in the Persian Gulf and also countries-in interest. The implications of a mere low-level conflict can escalate to total warfare, thus affecting regional and global strategic interests.

Samore (2015) states that Iran had entered a nuclear deal with five countries (the US, the UK, France, Germany, Russia and China) together with the European Union (EU)

namely the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in Vienna, Austria, in 2015. However, three years later, Iran was suspected of hiding its nuclear enrichment beyond the agreed volume under the nuclear deal, and thus, the US unilaterally departed from the accord and reinstated unilateral economic sanctions to suppress Iran. The US decision has caused Iran to retaliate by putting threats in the Strait of Hormuz. Tran (December 6, 2018) reiterates that if conflicts escalate between Iran and US-backed-up countries such as Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, it will result in potential sea blockades and sea interdiction by Iran using its armed forces. The armed closure of the Strait affects shipping operations, causing energy and insurance prices to rise drastically. Iran can mobilise its naval forces on its coastline and offshore installations, conduct mining operations, engage any country which intends to open the Strait, and put barriers into the Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS) passageway

Krotz (2011) discusses the current crises between Iran and the US after the Trump administration tried to pressure and isolate Iran on several issues such as the Iranian nuclear programme. The pressure on Iran by the US consists of economic sanctions and the US's influence on other countries not to deal with Iran. The JCPOA, or Iran nuclear deal, was disbanded by the US and not Britain, China, France, Germany, the European Union, and Russia. The economic sanctions and the failure of the nuclear deal have resulted in the conflict between the US and Iran.

### *The Potential Cooperation Between Iran and Oman*

Slackman (May 15, 2009) discusses the cooperation between Iran and Oman to develop a security pact in the region. The failure of US sanctions on Iran lies in the strong relationship and cooperation between Iran and Oman. Oman considers Iran as a crucial partner in politics and economy and too powerful and dangerous to resist collaboration. The other Arab countries are also in the same situation as Oman, like the UAE. Even though UAE leaders have disputes over three islands in the Persian Gulf, they still cannot stop their trade with Iran.

Wu (2017) explains Oman and Iran share close cooperation in various aspects, including economic, military and diplomatic matters. Oman was the only country with no worries about the threat from Iran compared to other Gulf countries. This can be seen during the Gulf War in the 1980s between Iran and Iraq when Oman hosted cease-fire talks for both countries in Muscat. Playing the role of mediator, Oman managed to reduce distrust in both countries in the war. Economic cooperation between Oman and Iran lies in the Kish and Hengam gas fields development in the Gulf.

Ikerd (2015) describes the conflict between Iran and Saudi by looking at their domestic affairs and foreign policies. The role of mediator or negotiator by Iran has marked significant contributing factors towards regional stability. The reason for the conflict is based on religious disunity; the Sunni-Shi'ite schism has clashed since a hundred years ago. The thesis also focuses on Oman's potential role by exploring its foreign policy and Oman-Saudi relations. On the other hand, Lons (March 3, 2018) discusses the historical cooperation between Iran and Oman and the latter's mediator role in regional disputes. Oman has exercised the policy of neutrality throughout time. Effective mediation must rely upon neutrality policy. An example of such an occasion includes Oman's diplomatic relations with Basyar Al-Assad of Syria, still maintained until today. They hosted the secret talks between Yemeni Houthis and Saudis in an effort to end the conflict in Yemen.

Vakil (September 2018) examines Iran's nuanced approach to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Instead of engaging with the GCC wholly, Iran has opted for bilateral

relations, particularly focusing on Oman. This strategic move indicates underlying conflicts within the GCC as a platform of central cooperation between Gulf countries. He also discusses the hedging strategy engagement with Iran to balance the pressure from the crises with the Saudis. The creation of a new regional security framework is needed in order to secure Iranian domestic stability as well as regional stability.

Tsukerman (November 1, 2019) analyses the Iran-Oman cooperation established in joint trading companies and banks to facilitate Iranian banks affected by the US sanctions. She also discusses the Iran-Oman joint military committee in supporting their military collaboration. This includes an agreement to support, facilitate, and develop trade and investment between the two countries and collaborate in maritime transport. She also enlists the essential cooperation between the two countries despite the sanctions by the US including strong military ties as depicted in joint exercises and Iranian military bases in Oman.

Schanzer and Salter (May 9, 2019) explain the role of Oman in creating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 through a backchannel between the US and Iran. The current US President, Donald Trump, later withdrew it in 2018. Oman maintains its policy of neutrality and upholds diplomacy. Oman still has a strong relationship with Iran politically and economically amidst the pressure by the US. They outline several new factors that involve Omani leadership towards the Iranian government.

Tran (March 29, 2019), highlights the long-standing strategy designed by Oman to secure stability in the region and its policy of neutrality. He also explains the direct role of Oman in the GCC formation 1981 and its policies about the Strait of Hormuz by enforcing its sanctity for international shipping. He further discusses the role of Oman during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. The result of the war strengthens Oman's position in the international arena.

Katzman *et al.* (January 6, 2020) describes the cooperation between the US and Oman in various aspects since 1980. He also discusses Oman's role as mediator in contributing towards regional stability. There are several occasions showing the importance of Oman in the US-Iran conflict. It includes the release of US citizens held by Iran and the establishment of JCPOA in 2015, the Saudi-Iran dispute. Katzman also explains the diversity in Oman's economy and workforce that attracts foreign investment despite its modest resources.

### **Analytical Framework**

The framework of this paper has been derived from two approaches: different observations of the reasons behind the conflict and factors that have determined the outcome of the conflict. The analysis has linked the research objective with the concept of power and national interest of both Oman and Iran in the Strait of Hormuz. The notion of power in international relations was introduced by Robert A. Dahl (1957) and, later, advocated the most by Hans Morgenthau (1960) as the theoretical core of international politics. It implies that the struggle for power is always the bread and butter of all politics. The statement assumes that the desire to dominate is an integral part of a human being. In international politics, the purpose of all states is to retrieve and build up power regardless of the goals and objectives of the government. Thus, it is a struggle for each country to dominate others. This concept of power consists of three elements: the conduct of a state or country to influence others, the capabilities of being used as a method of

influencing others, and the response of other countries to the conduct of the state (Turner 2005).

The concept of national interest is a fundamental notion in international relations. The meaning of the national interest is vague and ambiguous. Nevertheless, some of the definitions by Dahl (1957) provide general, long term and continuing purpose, which the state, the nation, and the government all see themselves as serving. The national interest refers to states that seek to protect or achieve in relation to each other. It means desires on the part of sovereign states (Krotz 2011). National interests can also be defined as the claims, objectives, goals, demands, and interests, in which a nation always tries to preserve, protect, defend, and secure in relations with others. This meaning of national interest corresponds with the definition made by Hans Morgenthau; the national interest is survival (Wu 2017).

### **Major Analysis and Key Discussions**

The discussion has focused on the oil industry in the Gulf region, including Iran and Oman. The global community's dependency on the Middle East oil supply has made the Strait of Hormuz become the most vital chokepoint in global oil supply, depicted by the amount of crude oil that streams from the region to the rest of the world. Iran is the most affected by the conflict because it relies heavily on the Strait of Hormuz to sell its oil to the rest of the world and also because of the economic sanction made by the US. Comparatively, Oman has little impact on the conflict because of its geographic location. Only Musandam Peninsular has offshore oil fields and is separated from the mainland of Oman. Its economy depends primarily on oil products and is affected by the fluctuation of oil prices if the conflict worsens.

Two factors cause the conflict or tensions in the Strait of Hormuz: the geopolitics of the Strait and the intervention of foreign military forces in the Strait. The geopolitics of the Strait has seen the emergence of Iran as a new hegemon in politics, economy and military might in the Middle East region. The Strait's strategic location has attracted leading global powers to establish influence in the region, especially the US, when it became the sole superpower after the conclusion of the Cold War and the split of Soviet Russia. The US's existence in the region is because the region was used to provide logistic support for war in Europe during the Second World War. The discussion also highlights the direct impact of the conflict on Iran and Oman. Their most vulnerable national interest lies in the economy because the countries revenue depends chiefly on the oil industry.

Iran and Oman need to secure their power and national interests by different means. Iran has sought coercive measures by proposing a threat to close the Strait, whereas Oman, a small power, has used diplomacy. The discussion proceeds with potential cooperation between the two countries in order to secure their national interest. The collaboration includes various aspects of politics, the economy and the military. In politics, Oman can play its role as a mediator to bring the parties to the conflict into negotiation. As the negotiation effort commences, they can economically cooperate by enhancing their bilateral relationship in the trade of natural gas and other products, such as the logistic services in seaports. Iranian products and commodities can be re-exported to the rest of the world through Oman's free trade agreements with certain countries and by establishing more direct shipping lines between the two countries to succeed in the effort. Military cooperation can be enhanced by exercising joint naval patrol operations in the Strait of Hormuz rather than merely some routine exercises conducted annually. The method and means of cooperation can be used purely for the preservation of its



economy and the Strait of Hormuz itself.

The dispute in the Strait of Hormuz refers to Iran's intention to become a nuclear state when its nuclear technology development exceeds commercial use. Its intention has frightened the neighbouring countries, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia, the US allies. Although the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has monitored its intention, Iran has been suspected of increasing its uranium enrichment in violation of the 2015 nuclear deal. Consequently, the US retracted from the JCPOA in 2018 and reinstated the economic embargo to ensure Iran obeyed the agreement. The impact of that decision sees Iran's threat of harassment and intent to close the strategic Strait has affected the global economy. By looking at the situation in the Persian Gulf region and nearby, Iran has been surrounded by threats of nuclear power such as Israel, Pakistan, India and the US. The existence of the US military bases surrounding Iran has increased the need for Iran to improve its military might by taking the risk of developing the nuclear programme. Military actions cannot settle the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz. It needs negotiation by the countries of interest in the Strait instead of Iran and Oman. The tensions and disputes among the Persian Gulf countries must be reduced through regional cooperation such as GCC without any foreign military forces intervention in the area.

### Conclusion

The potential cooperation between Iran and Oman as the littoral states of the Strait of Hormuz are certain efforts that can strengthen the existing political, economic and military relationships. Both states rely on each other to de-escalate the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz by utilising the role of Oman as a mediator to bring back the countries in conflict into negotiation and diplomacy. While the negotiation has been worked on, both littoral states must depend on each other to secure and stabilise their economy impacted by the conflict.

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