

Geopolitical Significance of West Asia

Dr. Md. Aminuzzaman

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ministry of Education, Ethiopia

Abstract: *West Asia has been the focus of the international attention for a number of reasons. Historically it was a central meeting place of the three old world continents. More recently, it has become the world's premier geopolitical flash point for two major reasons: (I) the establishment of the state of Israel centrally in the Arab core of a region which is overwhelmingly Islamic, and (II) the realization by a few West Asian states that, between them, they possess the world's major reserves of petroleum. War and military forces have long affected the development and security of West Asian energy supplies.*

Keywords: Geopolitics, Oil resources, Water resources, War and Military forces

Geopolitically, West Asia is the most important region of the world. The strategic geographical location of the West Asia has made the region from ancient times the centre of world focus among nations and Empires as they tried to control over the trade route to the east. West Asia is an area which is strategically situated at the junction of the three continents of Asia, Europe and Africa. In this way it commands the approaches of these continents. This centrally located region extends from Atlantic coast of North Africa to the Western edges of Central Asia and lies between the southern littoral of the Mediterranean and the north-western shores of the Indian Ocean. Because of its tri-continental location and its central position in the world island, the region has historically been cross road of the world.

It is generally believed that West Asia is a region where the first Neolithic revolution took place which resulted in the developments of trade and trade routes as a result West Asia influenced the commercial activities of ancient, medieval and modern periods. One can conclude that West Asia attained an important position in commercial history of the world because of its geographical location. During the 19th century West Asia became one of the important regions for European diplomacy. The rivalry among the European powers the beginning of the eastern question and the decline of the Ottoman empire were main political factors for the developments of the land routes through the centrally located region between the east and the west.

Two obvious routes for such a communication presented themselves: the Persian Gulf route and the Red sea route. In terms of distance also this area provided the only route for the European nations, in order to obtain political ascendancy in south and south east Asia. In one respect West Asia is the only alternative for the European region especially the Mediterranean powers to obtain political ascendancy in south east Asia. For this reason during the 19th century, West Asia played an important role in the political history of the European powers.

The relief features of the West Asian region themselves made the people adopt routes mainly through the Red Sea and Gulf region. The mountainous belt covering Turkey and northern Iran and the southern zone of West Asia made up of plains and dissected plateaus compelled the traders and merchants to think of Egypt as an easy passage. The northern belt of West Asia consisting of Turkey is formed

by the Pontus and Taurus mountains and in between lies the Anatolian plateau. In Iran along the southern shore of the Caspian sea is the Elburz mountain range and to the west and south is the Zagros mountain range. In the eastern Iran, a very complex pattern of mountain ranges usually describe as the eastern Iranian Highlands are found. Surrounded by these mountains and highlands is the central plateau of Iran with a height of five hundred metres.

In the south eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula and along the Red Sea coast uplands and mountain are found. The presence of the world largest so called Rubal- Khali (the empty quarter) in the south central Arabia checks the human movements. In the Levant area highlands are found in the proximity of the coast, with a gradual decline in altitude towards the interior such as mount Lebanon. The presence of the north south fault zone of the Dead Sea lowland (three hundred metres below sea level) forms another characteristics features of the area. A birds' eye view of the relief features of the whole West Asia reveals that they present considerable barrier to the human movement compelling traders and armies in most of the cases pass through the Red Sea and Gulf region.

The discovery of the Cape (of Good Hope) route to the east in 1498 disturbed the well organised international trade routes of West Asia. The prosperity of the ports of the Mediterranean Sea was also lost. The commercial supremacy of the Mediterranean powers came to an end. The Cape route shifted the major commercial activities from the hands of the Mediterranean powers to those of the Atlantic powers of Europe. The discovery of this route also immeasurably decreased the geo-political importance of the Mediterranean sea. Consequently the 'middle sea' remained no longer the middle sea of the world and fell into disuse, except for local purposes, for three centuries to come.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 to world navigation heralded a new era in the geopolitical history of West Asia. It influenced the political geography of the many sates of the West Asia, and also revived the commercial significance and prosperity of the Mediterranean port like Genoa, Venice, Izmir, Istanbul and Alexandria, which briefly waned after the circumnavigation of the globe.

The opening of the Suez Canal brought a dramatic change in the diplomacy of Europe as well as in the commercial world. Its geo-economic, geo-strategic and geo-political

effects were far-reaching. Being the shortest water route between North America and Europe, on the one hand, and south Asia and east Asia, on the other, it naturally reduced the commercial importance of the Cape route. The ships which were passing through the Cape route, now turned towards the Mediterranean sea and started passing through the canal. The canal enhanced the geo- strategic importance of the Mediterranean sea and the Indian Ocean to European and North American nations. The opening of the Suez canal created a new geo- strategic area in the heart of the West Asia. It also influenced the foreign policies of European nations and the Ottoman Empire. An entirely new geo- political concept was developing in the European diplomacy. Some important European nations started thinking in terms of political domination over Egypt and effective control of the canal. This led to protracted political and diplomatic warfare between the powers interested in West Asia and South Asia. In this way the importance of Egypt from geo-political point of view immensely increased.

It seems that during the nineteenth century and up to the World War I Britain was the dominant power in Europe, West Asia and South and South East Asia. After the opening of the Suez canal in 1869 the political power and influence of Britain was dependent on the security of West Asia and of the Suez canal. It will not be wrong to say that the Suez canal being geo- strategic and important waterway, played a vital role in consolidating the British domination in the south and south east Asia, particularly, India.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Britain started to further consolidate its position in the Gulf. Britain neutralized the grievances of France by diverting the latter to North Africa. It satisfied Russia by giving it a part of Russia in 1907 in a secret agreement between the two countries. It checked the German ambitions of Drang nach Osten by acquiring shares in the proposed Berlin –Baghdad railway project and establishing complete political control in the Persian Gulf.

During the First World War I, Ottoman-Turks, Germans, British, Russian, France and even Greek and Italian struggle for West Asian territory. However, the British and France emerged the main imperialist power in the region. France held sway in Syria and Lebanon and also in part of Africa, Britain, got three mandates of Palestine, Trans- Jordan and Iraq.

During the II World War parts of West Asia were converted into a military supply centre by the allied powers. Britain in order to consolidate its position entered into a wide variety of treaties, agreements and arrangements with the rulers of the Gulf countries. These exclusive treaties strengthened the British influence in the Gulf and provided the former to play the role of an arbiter and peace keeper. After signing the exclusive treaties, the Gulf became practically a British lake. Britain inevitably took control of the sea lanes of the Gulf. British dominations became even more complete throughout the two World Wars and indeed right up to the withdrawal after 1968.

During the World War II Great Britain enjoyed a more advantageous position in Egypt and West Asia in general than during the earlier war. The Ottoman empire was no longer there and three important countries between the Persian Gulf and the eastern Mediterranean (Iraq, Trans-Jordan and Palestine) were under its control. The 1936 treaty with Egypt and 1930 treaty with Iraq had stipulated that in the event of war these two countries would provide facilities to Britain. King Abdullah of Transjordan was too willing to help it. The Zionists, who had increased their strength in Palestine under the British mandate, were ready to help Britain with an eye on its prospective cooperation towards the formation of Israel. Britain considered the region as hinge of victory and the Suez Canal as a pillar of Eastern as well as the West Asian empires.

After the World War II Britain supremacy in the east of Suez started declining. The decolonization in south Asia and elsewhere was the result. Meanwhile Cold War started between the two ideological blocks and the Soviet pressure on Iran, Turkey and Greece increased. Oil was needed by the Western power for the reconstruction of Europe thus it had acquired strategic and economic significance. Therefore in 1951 the US, France and Britain and Turkey proposed to Egypt the formation of the Middle East command with its centre at the Suez canal base for the security of the wider area of West Asia. The aim was to create multi power base in West Asia as a bulwark against the Soviet Union.

The USA had already entered West Asia in the context of the Cold War through the Truman Doctrine. While the British influence was decreasing in the World Affairs including West Asia, the American Power and prestige were rising. The US, with an eye on its future role in the region, gradually and slowly increased its influence by replacing Britain in West Asia. Soon rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union in West Asia became a major dynamics in the region's relations and geopolitics for nearly 45 years. The Eisenhower administration sought to unify the region resistance to the Soviet Union. With the US and British encouragement Baghdad pact was formed in 1955. The 1956 Suez crisis led to the announcement of Eisenhower Doctrine in January 1957 which committed the US to counter Soviet action in West Asia.

The British government decision to withdraw its force from the east of the Suez by 1971 raised the question of security of Gulf particularly the sea routes (Strait of Hormuz). The western policy makers looked to local states with compatible interest to assume responsibility for security. In the Gulf, Iran and Saudi Arabia were ostensible choice as “ twin- pillars” of local strength. Under the “Gum Doctrine” (Nixon Doctrine) the American sought to encourage the developments of an indigenous security in the Gulf. This support for local cooperation , but also included a large scale transfer of military resources, so as to provide Iran and Saudi Arabia with the capability to defend not only themselves, but also the neighbouring small powers. The Carter Doctrine was announced in early 1980, following the Iranian revolution , collapse of the Central treaty Organization (Baghdad pact) and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. The Carter Doctrine emphasised US interest in the Gulf and in laying the ground

work for a Rapid Deployment Force, subsequently known as the Central Command. Under Reagan's administration the US mounted a massive effort to effectively guard its interests in the Gulf. Emphasis was being placed on trying to develop a 'strategic consensus' to counter the Soviet Union along a belt stretching from Egypt to Pakistan.

Oil: the contribution oil as the primary source of energy is highest among the all other existing sources of energy. Until the development of an economically viable alternative source of energy, oil will remain an indispensable source of energy. And the development of economically viable alternative is not likely or possible in the near future. This makes the Gulf oil reserves important rather essential to the industrial nations of the world. The huge oil reserves and very low costs of production make the Gulf oil industry the most outstanding economic zone of the world. In terms of proven oil reserves, Gulf's share is significant. Currently the Gulf region accounted for 65% of the world's proven oil reserves and of the total OPEC's proven oil reserves about 72% are located in this region. Similarly about 90.6 % of the regional subtotal is found in the Gulf region.

In terms of daily oil production, the share of the Gulf countries in the total world production is quite substantial and imperative to the oil importing nations. Today the average daily output of Gulf States totalled 23 million barrels per day or 33% of the world total oil production. The Gulf States currently constitute 69% of the OPEC's daily oil production. The vast reserves of natural and associated gases of the Gulf states are too significant from the energy point of view. On average about 500 cubic feet of gases are associated with every barrel. The Gulf States possess 35% of the world natural gas reserves. The daily output of the Gulf States at present accounted for 32 % of OPEC's gas production and 7.6% of the world total production.

The increasing use of oil in various sector of economy has converted it into a strategic resource. The continuous increasing global oil demand and rapid pace of industrialization has further transformed into an important centre of the world. The continuous supply of these strategic resource has become now a political, an economic, and a strategic imperative.

The oil producing Gulf States have gradually emerged as significant markets for Japanese, Western Europe and American goods and services. Following the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973, these countries have been acquiring foreign exchange to mobilize it for rapid economic development. It has also been possible to finance massive imports. The Gulf has, since, been turned out to be a good market for the West.

The Gulf countries may become prospective partners for joint venture with multinational and other firms of the US, Japan and the Western Europe. Above all due to the lack of stability, the Gulf region is a lucrative consumer markets for arms transfer. The variables like regional and external powers rivalries in the Gulf, the security of the Gulf oil supplies and the sea lanes, and the geostrategic location of the region have accelerated arms acquisition programme of the Gulf States.

The brief appraisal of the strategic and economic variable reveals that the Gulf has become an important geopolitical region of the globe and cannot be ignored by the advanced countries as well as the countries of the third world. Gulf is highly susceptible and venerable to the developments and events in the regions. The interests of the advanced and third world countries converge here. Therefore they are concerned with the events and their outcome in the region.

Water Resources: Water is the most precious life sustaining resource. It is essential to health, agriculture, industry, transportation, energy, science, recreation and in short to human existence. The development of industrial and urban centres, the need to increase agricultural production and more generally, the overall emphasis of the governments and people of West Asian countries for better socio-economic and living conditions resulted in the increase of demand for water in the region. The need to make full use of the naturally available fresh water and to find new sources of supply has never been more acute in the region.

Fresh water supply in West Asia is increasingly critical and, thus considered more precious resources than oil because of the paucity of water in the region. Water in West Asia is a conflict laden determinant and has been regarded as the underlying cause of wars in the past and also as the potential source of future conflicts. Some observers believe that scarcity and rapid diminution of fresh water in the region may prove to be catastrophic in future and water generated conflicts could well be the inevitable outcome.

The stark reality is that water has assumed the same importance as oil in the region. The scarcity and rapid depletion of water continues to be a major problem in West Asia. Moreover the issue of the water resources does undoubtedly play prominent role in the regional relations. Hence, the control of this fundamental resource has been regarded as legitimate "hydraulic imperatives" of all the states of West Asia. It may be said that water resources in West Asia have assumed political, economic, legal, social and ecological dimensions.

The greater part of West Asian territories fall in arid and semiarid zones of the world which makes water a scarce, limited and exhaustible commodity. This single geographical factor controls the distribution of water resources in the region. Water resources of – West Asia constitute 9.4 percent of the total water resources of the world. The per capita share among the inhabitants of the region comes to 1844 cubic meter in a year where as the world average is 12900 cubic metres annually. On this basis West Asia may be categorized as one of the water deficit region of the world.

References

- [1] Anderson, Ewan W., *"the Middle East: Geography and Geopolitics"*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Groups, London, 2000
- [2] Banuazizi, Ali, Myron Weiner, *"The New geopolitics of central Asia and its borders lands"*, Indiana University press, 1994.

- [3] Beaumont, P.Blake, G.H, and Wagstaff, J.M, (ed.), “*The Middle East: Geographical Study*”, S.W Arrow Smith. Ltd., U.K, 1978
- [4] Bell, Coral, “*The post- soviet World: Geopolitics and crisis*”, Strategic and Defence centre, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 1992.
- [5] Blacksell, Mark, “*Political Geography*”, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, London, 2006.
- [6] British Petroleum Statistical Review of the World Energy 2009.
- [7] Carson, Lucile and Allen K. Philbrick, “*Geography and World Politics*”, 2nd Edition, Prentice Hall, Inc., 1959.
- [8] Chorbajan, Levon, “*The Caucasian Knot: The History and Geopolitics of Nagorno- Karabag*”, Zed Books, 1994.
- [9] Cohen- Tanugi , Laurent, “*The Shape of the world to come: Charting the Geopolitics of a new century*” , Columbia University press , New York , 2008
- [10] Cohen, Saul Bernard, “*Geography and politics in a World divided*”, Random House, New York, 1963.
- [11] Conant, Melvin and Fern Racine, “*The Geopolitics of Energy*”, Boulder, West View press, 1978.
- [12] Cordesman, Anthony H. “*Energy Developments in the Middle East*”, Praeger Publishers, Westport, U.S.A, 2004
- [13] Hoskin, H.L., “*British Routes to India*”, London, 1956.
- [14] Joe Bearnes and Army Myers Jaffe, “Persian Gulf and the Geopolitics of Oil”, *Survival*, Vol. 48, No.1, spring 2006.
- [15] Lenczowski, George, “*The Middle in World Affairs*”, London, 1976.
- [16] Middle East and North Africa, Europa publication, latest ed.
- [17] Wait, D.C, “*Britain and the Suez Canal: the Background*”, London, 1956.

Author Profile

Dr. Md. Aminuzzaman is presently working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. He obtained his Master and PhD degree from Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India and was awarded post Graduate Diploma in (Remote Sensing and GIS) from University of Twente, Netherlands. He has to his credit several research papers. He also author of the Book “*Flood Risk Mapping in part of Mahanadi Delta using Remote Sensing and GIS*”. His field of specialization is Remote Sensing and GIS, Political geography, urban geography and Population geography.