
OMAN'S STRATEGIC LOCATION, ITS FOREIGN POLICY AND AIR POWER CAPABILITIES

INDRANI TALUKDAR

Oman has emerged as a powerful small country in the international relations arena. With an independent and pragmatic foreign policy, Oman is maintaining a balanced relationship with all its neighbours, including Iran. In times of crisis, their policy will be an asset to the West, especially the US. It is against this backdrop that this article traces the strategic position of Oman, its foreign policy and its relationship with the US. It also focusses on Oman's defence forces, especially its air power. In doing so, the article analyses how India's position will be important for both Oman and the US. and vice versa.

OMAN'S STRATEGIC LOCATION

Oman is the third largest country in the Arabian peninsula. It has land borders with Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Its importance lies in the fact that it overlooks the three seas – the Persian Gulf, the Sea of Oman and the Arabian Sea. The coastlines extend from the

Indrani Talukdar is a Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi

XXX

Strait of Hormuz¹ in the north to the border with the Republic of Yemen in the south.² The strategic position of Oman is such that it is the meeting point of two continents—the Indian subcontinent and Africa. It falls between two economic powerhouses—Europe and the emerging industrialised Asian countries, entitling Oman to become a gateway for these regions. It provides an overwatch position for both the entrance to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The deep-draft parts of the Strait of Hormuz that are essential for oil tankers are entirely in Omani territory.³ It's nearly 2,000 km coastline on the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea, and being the only member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with significant ports on the Indian Ocean, offers relatively secure pipeline routes to the east that would bypass the chokepoint at the Strait of Hormuz.⁴

In fact, the position of the Strait of Hormuz and the countries surrounding it has increased the significance of West Asia, resulting in a complex web of conflicts and ambitions exacerbated by the increase in arms flow and the vested interest of other regions. The strait is a vital highway, through which consumable fuel of industrial world is supplied; however, this has led to the security vulnerability of the region. The vulnerability and importance of this region is also increasing, because, apart from the presence of oil and gas,

-
1. Iranian naval forces monitor and police the Strait of Hormuz along with the Sultanate of Oman via the Omani enclave of Musandam. Almost all entrances into the Persian Gulf are made through Iranian waters and most exits are through Omani waters. Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, "The Geo-Politics of the Strait of Hormuz: Could the U.S. Navy be defeated by Iran in the Persian Gulf?" January 8, 2012, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-geo-politics-of-the-strait-of-hormuz-could-the-u-s-navy-be-defeated-by-iran-in-the-persian-gulf/28516>, accessed on January 29, 2013.
 2. *Oman's News Agency*, http://www.omannews.gov.om/ona/english/Geographic_Location.jsp, accessed on January 29, 2013.
 3. Robert D. Kaplan, "Oman's Renaissance Man", *Foreign Policy*, March 1, 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/01/omans_renaissance_man, accessed on January 9, 2013.
 4. Anthony H. Cordesman, Khalid R. Al-Rodhan, *Gulf Military Forces In An Era Of Asymmetric Wars: Vol I* (New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), p.119.

of the placement of strategic islands which are of military importance⁵ to the West Asian countries and the US. Hence, in the game of power between countries and regions, Oman's location is vital for Oman itself as well as for the rest of the interested countries in this region.

XXX

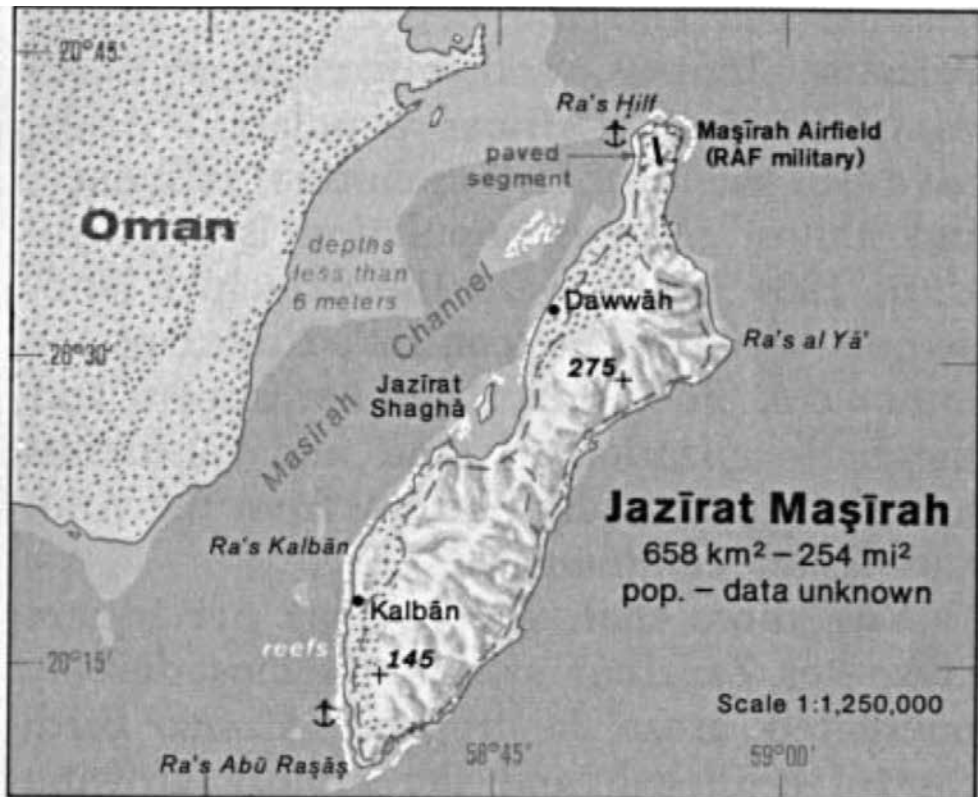
An important aspect of Oman's strategic location is that apart from its positioning in the strait, the country is consecrated by other vital locations. The top of the Jebel Harim mountain, which is in the interior of the peninsula, was, and can, continue to serve as a telecommunications/ intelligence station. This area has allowed Omanis to monitor activities throughout the Gulf region and out into the Indian Ocean.⁶ Another location is the Masirah Island; stretching about 70 km, the island occupies a strategic position near the entry point to the Gulf of Oman from the Arabian Sea. It is approximately 200 miles south of the capital city of Muscat and 12 miles off of the central coast of Oman in the Arabian Sea.⁷ Oman has one of its military air bases in this island. Apart from its own base (located on the north of the island), this island's strategically

-
5. "Military Position of Persian Gulf", Persian Gulf Studies Centre, <http://www.persiangulfstudies.com/en/index.asp?p=pages&ID=218> accessed on January 29, 2012.
 6. Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Oman's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century", *Middle East Policy Council*, February 15-18, 2009, <http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/omans-foreign-policy-twenty-first-century>, accessed on January 18, 2013.
 7. Raymond S. Rollings and Gary L. Anderton, "Base Course Aggregate Considerations at Masirah Airbase, Oman", <http://pavement.wes.army.mil/papers/55/Paper55.PDF>, accessed on February 5, 2013.

positioned military facilities have given access to the UK⁸ and later to the US, in 1975. In 1980, an access agreement was signed between Oman and the U.S. use of the airfield, along with other military facilities. The air base on the north of island has its main runway 17/35, almost leading into the sea. The second runway, 07/25, crosses the main strip. It is the deployment site of the rapid reaction forces of the US. The significance of the base is that it has a 12,000-ft landing strip and an emergency landing strip, a vast ammunition depot and six airplane hangars. These make the base amongst one of the most important American bases in the Persian Gulf region.⁹ In fact, this base is also known as Camp Justice¹⁰ or “tent city”¹¹ and hosts anti-submarine patrol craft.¹²

The position of Masirah airfield is important for any country in order to enforce the strategic encircling of Iran and Pakistan with air and naval power. In fact, observing the growing security dilemma for the US, with its belligerent relationship with Iran and the subtle threat from China, this air base is strategically indispensable. And with the US “pivot of Asia” or the military-operational concept, ‘Air-Sea Battle’, this air base serves as a critical staging point to launch any air and naval campaign.

-
8. With the sultan's permission, Great Britain established a Royal Air Force (RAF) base on the island in the 1930s. The British first became interested in Masirah in 1929 when they established an unmanned staging post on the island which later expanded to an air base that was built by the RAF during World War II. Frank Noort, “Masirah Air Base”, *Airfighters.com*, March 13, 2008, <http://www.airfighters.com/page.php?id=70>, accessed on January 29, 2013. Masirah used to be considered one of the less desirable RAF overseas postings: hot, humid, dusty. After the Iranian and other regional crises in the latter days of the Carter Administration, the US spent a lot of money on airfields in friendly countries in the Mid-East. That build-up proved essential to Desert Shield. But after the construction, Masirah is a thriving place with two full-length modern runways at right angles to each other, acres of concrete, modern housing and roads, and satellite television. It is an important staging post for the Far East for the U.S. and U.K. Tony Gale, “RAF Masirah”, <http://ukmamsoba.org/raf%20on%20masirah.htm>, accessed on February 19, 2013.
 9. Noort, “Masirah Air Base”, *Airfighters.com*.
 10. Camp Justice is the name of several American military bases. They are in Diego Garcia (Indian Ocean), Iraq and in Guantanamo. Quite Recently, the U.S. has renamed its base in the Masirah Island in Oman as Camp Justice. It shows the importance of this base for the U.S.
 11. “Masirah, Oman”, *Global Security.org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/masirah.htm>, accessed on February 13, 2013.
 12. <https://maps.google.com/maps/ms?ie=UTF8&t=h&oe=UTF8&mmsa=0&mmsid=204401305100193944749.0004bd6c370c083cb7145> accessed on January 29, 2013.



Map source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Masirah_76.jpg

The other bases, apart from the Masirah Island base, which are strategically placed in Oman are the following: one, the Omolghanam base which is located at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz in the Musanadam region and is significant from the fact that from that base one can supervise the Strait of Hormuz and maritime activities in the Persian Gulf. Two, the Musandam peninsula,¹³ which makes Oman one of the guardians of the strait of Hormuz and, in turn, of Persian Gulf trade. Although Iran is situated 10 miles across the Strait to Hormuz, however the main deep water channels and shipping lanes in the strait lie in Omani waters.¹⁴ Three, the Khazab

13. This peninsula is an exclave of Oman separated from the rest of the country by the United Arab Emirates but commanding the Strait of Hormuz, through which passes 20 percent of the Western world's oil. "Small Air Force with a Big Reputation", *Arabian Aerospace Online News Service*, December 21, 2011, <http://www.arabianaerospace.aero/small-air-force-with-a-big-reputation.html> accessed on February 19, 2013.

14. Lefebvre, n.6.

XXX

naval base which is also located in the Musanadam region and is significant due to its being close to the Strait of Hormuz. In Khazab, there exists a 6,500-foot landing strip which is used by U.S. airplanes. Four, the Samarit base which is both a land and aerial base. This is located north of the Salalah city, though its entitlement is with the U.K. By virtue of the 1970 contract between England and Oman, the U.K. has developed the military airport of this base. The fifth is the Beitolfalaj base.

Oman has permitted control of this land base to the U.K.¹⁵ Some of Oman's military forces are deployed in this base under the supervision of the U.K.¹⁶ The sixth one is the northern base in Seeb which serves both as a military and civilian base. The seventh is under construction since 2010 at Adam, about 100 miles southwest of Muscat. This base is expected to host the first Eurofighter Typhoon Squadron.¹⁷ This base is in Oman's interior part and is shielded from the Gulf approaches by mountains that will become natural sites for air defences. This excellently protected location can do air patrols along Oman's north and the strait.¹⁸ The eighth base is Thumrait, which has an air base. The town of Thumrait is on the main road which links Dhofar to the rest of Oman.

These bases enhance Oman's position as a vital country in the new world order. However, this significance also exposes Oman to security vulnerabilities. Under Sultan Qaboos, the country is managing to protect itself from the threats and plays an important role in the region, especially owing to its unique foreign policy.

15. Oman is essentially a British intelligence base, with Britain being its largest foreign investor. The U.K. also helped Omanis in developing its defence sector. British officers along with the Omanis had held high positions in the Omani military until the 1980s. Elliot Murphy, "Britain, Oman and 'Our Kind of Guy'", *Ceasefire Magazine*, February 1, 2012, <http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/oman-our-kind-of-guy/> accessed on February 7, 2013.

16. Noort, "Masirah Air Base", *Airfighters.com*.

17. n.13.

18. "Oman's Air Force Upgrades: From Jaguars to F-16s & Eurofighters", *Defense Industry Daily*, December 24, 2012, <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/Oman-Looks-to-Replace-Its-Jaguar-Jets-06503/> accessed on February 9, 2013.

OMAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

XXX

The aspect of "good international citizenship"¹⁹ along with a pragmatic foreign policy has helped Oman to maintain a peaceful existence with its volatile neighbours and also with the world. Its foreign policy follows a post-Cold War non-alignment strategy²⁰, wanting to be friends with every country. As a result, Oman has been able to project its uniqueness as well as independence in the region. In fact, it is observed that many Gulf and Arab states are quick to break diplomatic relations, and adopt a confrontational stance and grandstand to provoke countries which pose a threat or is not in line with their alliance structure. However, Oman, from 1970,²¹ has explicitly adopted the policy of **adapting to changing circumstances, remaining non-aligned, not harbouring (at least, not visibly) hostile intentions, and avoiding confrontations.**²² This has actually helped Oman gain its important status in the international arena and in West Asia.

Over the past three decades, the Sultanate of Oman has conducted this unique foreign policy, characterised by independence (maintaining freedom of action), pragmatism (demonstrating flexibility in reaching accommodation with regional and global powers), and moderation (eschewing extreme positions and supporting a stable regional political-military status quo). In fact, during Said bin Taimur's reign, Oman even followed an isolationist

19. This concept was coined by Gareth Evans, former Australian foreign minister. The core notion was that "being, and being seen to be, a good international citizen" should be seen not as the "foreign policy equivalent of boy-scout good deeds", but as a distinct component of any country's national interest, "quite distinct from the familiar duo of security and economic interests". http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gareth_Evans_%28politician%29, accessed on January 21, 2013.

20. "Everyone's Friend: Oman in the Spotlight", Cominganarchy.com, <http://cominganarchy.com/2010/09/16/oman-in-the-spotlight/>, accessed on January 9, 2013.

21. Oman was taken over by Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said in 1970 in a coup from his father Sultan Said bin Taimur.

22. "Oman's Unique Foreign Policy", Cominganarchy.com, <http://cominganarchy.com/2010/03/23/omans-unique-foreign-policy/> accessed on January 9, 2013.

policy.²³ But slowly and steadily, observing the essentials of the region, Sultan Qaboos started to formulate the foreign policy of Oman in a more balanced manner.

His foresight for Oman can be observed during the 1980s. In 1981, Oman, along with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE, formed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)²⁴ for two reasons. Firstly, it was in response to the perceived threat posed to the Persian Gulf security by the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88);²⁵ and, secondly, it was for Oman's own foundation as a country.²⁶ However, by 1974, Sultan Qaboos asked the states of the region to assume responsibility for their own collective security²⁷ which helped Oman in strengthening its foreign policy.

Oman initially wanted an umbrella of common and collective security with all the other Gulf countries, but with the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the emergence of Saudi Arabia, it wanted to have an independent foreign and security policy without unbalancing the arrangement of its relationship with others. Oman could foresee the complexities in the region. For instance, it did not, and has not, regarded (at least openly) Iran as a danger for its own security as much as the other Arab Gulf states have and, during recurring conflicts, has argued, in principle, for neutrality and

23. Lefebvre, n.6.. This policy first began to take shape following the July 1970 palace coup in Muscat, when Qaboos bin Said, covertly assisted by British military advisers, seized the throne from his father, Said bin Taymur. The young sultan immediately moved to modernise Oman's economy, exploiting this country's relatively small but increasingly lucrative petroleum exports. He also set in motion the so-called "Omani renaissance" by undertaking social, educational and cultural reforms that continue to this day. Ibid.

24. The conflict between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s and other area tensions had led to the culmination of Sultan Qaboos's long-time efforts to help form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which brought the six conservative Gulf countries together in what was the Arabian Peninsula's first jointly provided security effort. While participating in all regional security activities as part of the GCC, Oman did not take sides in the Iran-Iraq War, managing to retain all regional relationships and its security ties with the West. Joseph A. Kechichian, "Oman: A Unique Foreign Policy", *RAND*, http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB2501/index1.html, accessed on January 21, 2013.

25. For example, unlike Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, which had openly supported Iraq and opposed Iran, Oman maintained positive ties with both warring countries.

26. Lefebvre, n.6.

27. Steffen Wippel, "Economic Integration from a Country Perspective: Oman in the Gulf Cooperation Council", Panel "Gulf Economies in Transition", BRISMES Annual Conference 2012 Middle East Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, March 27, 2012, pp1 and 4, <http://brismes2012.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/steffen-wippel-economic-integration-from-a-country-perspective.pdf>, accessed on January 10, 2013.

engagement, rather than confrontation.

Another example of Oman's independent position in foreign affairs within the GCC was the support for Yemen's accession as a member since the early 1990s.²⁸ Even though Yemen was extended membership in 2006, it is yet to become a member,²⁹ nevertheless, Oman's support for its membership came from the fact that it shares its borders with Yemen and the Salah³⁰ port which is near Yemen. Realising that instability within Yemen, along with militancy, will remain a threat to Omani security, Sultan Qaboos' exhibited the quality of adroit diplomacy by taking this position.

Along with adroitness, Oman has an unobtrusive diplomacy which could be witnessed during the release of American Sarah Shourd from Evin prison in Iran on September 14, 2010. Engaging Iran³¹ by way of Omani diplomacy can, in the future allow the U.S. to quietly negotiate on issues without the bellicose rhetoric that has defined Iranian-US relations.³² If this uniqueness can be maintained, even after Sultan Qaboos, it will help Oman to be in a strategic position. Sultan Qaboos has been awarded by many countries for his contribution towards positive and adroit diplomacy. Sultan

28. Ibid., p.2. Oman counts among the small oil producers in the Gulf area, and for a long time its per capita income lagged behind its wealthier neighbours. Still today, according to many interlocutors, Oman pursues a development path more focussed on steadiness than the more glamorous Dubai model, which it regards as neither sustainable nor consistent with cultural values. Ibid, p.3.

29. For further studies, refer Edward Burke, "'One Blood and One Destiny'? Yemen's Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council", Research Paper, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, The Centre for European Reform, No.23, June 2012, http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/Yemen-and-the-GCC_burke_june12.pdf, accessed on January 17, 2013.

30. With the port of Salalah, Oman already has a maritime hub that leads the world in transshipping, with around 98 per cent of the goods that arrive departing for other destinations. "Oman's Growth Focuses on IOR Nations Rather Than GCC: Expert", *Muscat Daily.com*, January 25, 2012, <http://www.muscatdaily.com/Archive/Oman/Oman-s-growth-focuses-on-IOR-nations-rather-than-GCC-Expert>, accessed on January 28, 2013.

31. Iran's Weapons of mass destruction (WMD), missiles, and asymmetric Capabilities are Potential Threat to Oman and the other Gulf States. Cordesman, and R. Al-Rodhan, n.4. p.121. Islamic Revolution Guards Corps' (IRGC) surface and sub-surface systems as well as ground-to-sea missiles with very long ranges have the capability to cover the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman. "Persian Gulf and Sea of Oman under Iran Range", *Weapon and Technology*, <http://weapons.technology.youngester.com/2011/01/persian-gulf-and-sea-of-oma-under-iran.html>, accessed on January 28, 2013.

32. "Oman's Low-Key Diplomatic Strength", *Middle East Policy Council*, September 20, 2010, <http://www.mepc.org/articles-commentary/commentary/oman-s-low-key-diplomatic-strength>, accessed on January 10, 2013.

XXX

of Oman has reaffirmed the country's policy of reliance on wisdom and the patient approach when addressing the development of new issues on the regional and international arenas.³³

In this era of globalisation and new world order, countries are interdependent and also aspire to gain power. For countries like the US that want to maintain hegemony, relationship with Oman will remain significant since it will need to maintain strong ties with West Asia and the smaller states in that region for the smooth flow of oil and energy, and security and safeguarding of its power. Oman and other states like Qatar have highlighted the importance of small states in the international arena. In fact, in an increasingly multi-polar world, small states matter in the diplomatic domain for global governance.³⁴ Hence, with the current interconnectedness and security dilemma; countries of all sizes are interdependent on each other for their own national interest, growth, survivability and also the stability of the global system. In this context, the relationship between Oman and the US is critical for both.

OMAN-US. RELATIONS

The relationship between Oman and the US can be traced back to the friendship treaty of 1833. The treaty was one of the first of its kind with an Arab state. It was replaced by the Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations, and Consular Rights signed at Salalah on December 20, 1958. With this treaty, diplomatic communications started between the two countries.³⁵ This relationship was cemented further by having free trade between both

33. "Qaboos Reaffirms Omani Policy Fundamentals", *Khaleej Times*, January 8, 2013, http://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?section=middleeast&xfile=data/middleeast/2013/january/middleeast_january106.xml, accessed on January 10, 2013.

34. Andrew F. Cooper and Timothy M. Shaw, "The Diplomacies of Small States at the Start of the Twenty-first Century: How Vulnerable? How Resilient?" in Andrew F. Cooper and Timothy M. Shaw eds., *The Diplomacies of Small States: Between Vulnerability and Resilience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.2.

35. Kenneth Katzman, "Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy", Congressional Research Service, March1, 2011, p.1.

countries in 2006.³⁶ This relationship has helped the US in its own strategic planning and its hold over the region. The US has its Central Command (USCENTCOM)³⁷ located between the European and Pacific combatant commands. US Central Command's area of responsibility covers the "central" area of the globe and consists of 20 countries out of which Oman is one. The relationship between Oman and the US has been of mutuality. Oman has long permitted USCENTCOM to conduct exercises in Oman, and US Navy ships to use Omani facilities. Oman has provided data on tanker and other ship transits of the Strait of Hormuz to the US and U.K. from its base on Goat Island³⁸ since the early 1980s.³⁹

XXX

36. Wippel, n.27, p.4.

37. The US Central Command (CENTCOM) is one of 10 combatant commands of the United States military. Six of these commands, including CENTCOM, have an Area of Responsibility (AOR), a specific geographic region of the world where the combatant commanders may plan and conduct operations as defined under the Unified Command Plan. It was established on January 1, 1983. When the hostage crisis in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan underlined the need to strengthen US interests in the region, President Jimmy Carter established the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) in March 1980. To provide a stronger, more lasting solution in the region, President Ronald Reagan took steps to transform the RDJTF into a permanent unified command over a two-year period. The first step was to make the RDJTF independent of the US Readiness Command (read for presentation), followed by the activation of USCENTCOM in January 1983. <http://www.centcom.mil/about-u-s-central-command-centcom>, accessed on January 21, 2013.

38. This island base or Al-Ghanam island base is almost directly opposite Iran's base and port at Bandar Abbas. It is an Omani naval base.

39. Anthony H. Cordesman, "USCENTCOM and Its Area of Responsibility: Cooperation, Burden Sharing, Arms Sales, and Centcom's Analysis by Country and Subregion", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, April 1998, p.5, <http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/uscentcom2%5B1%5D.pdf>, accessed on January 29, 2013.



U.S. Military Bases in West Asia.⁴⁰

Sultan Qaboos has long seen the US as the key security guarantor of the region and has consistently advocated expanded defence cooperation among the Gulf states. Oman was the first Gulf state to formalise defence relations with the US after the Persian Gulf region was shaken by Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution. The agreement between them allowed US forces to access Omani military facilities. In fact in April 1980, the US used Oman's Masirah Island air base to launch an attempt to rescue the US hostages. Under the US-Oman access agreement, which has been renewed in 1985, 1990,

40. John Glaser, "U.S. Military Bases in Middle East", December 6, 2011, <http://antiwar.com/blog/2011/12/06/u-s-military-bases-in-the-middle-east/>, accessed on February 5, 2013.

2000, and 2010, US the reportedly can use—with an advance notice and for specified purposes—Oman’s military airfields in Seeb, Muscat, Thumrait, and Masirah Island. Also some U.S. Air Force equipment, including lethal munitions, have been stored at these bases.⁴¹ The military access agreement between them provided U.S. access to building cantonments, hardened shelters, warehouses, and other facilities at Seeb, Muscat, Thumrait, Masirah and Khasabt air bases, and ports at Muscat and Salalah, in return for \$320 million to build-up these facilities. The constructions of these bases was done keeping US interest in mind for any rapid deployment in a time of urgency in the Gulf region.⁴²

The constructions in these areas include facilities for rear-area staging and forward deployment, with improved operations, personnel, storage, and maintenance facilities. The US Navy has developed an aircraft maintenance facility, ground support equipment shop, warehouse facility, and ammunition storage facility. The US Army has created a staging base at Masirah⁴³ to support the forward deployment of the US Army forces. Apart from building cantonments, hardened shelters, warehouses, the US helped provide dispersal and access pavements, warehouses which are environmentally controlled, transient billeting, and cantonment support areas at Seeb and Thumrait. Oman has allowed both the U.K. and U.S. to use it as a staging base.⁴⁴ For both these countries, Seeb is the main transport and logistic base, collocated with the international airport, while Masirah supports air defence, strike/interdiction and training. Both bases host airborne surveillance aircraft which cover the land and sea approaches.⁴⁵ Oman gives the U.S. Air Force access to its al-Seeb air base for maintenance of transport and refueling planes.⁴⁶ U.S. Air Force has made the Seeb Air

41. Katzman, n.35, pp.6-7.

42. Cordesman, n.35, p.5

43. The US has deployed B-1B bombers, C-130 air transports and AC-130 *air gunships at the Masira air base*. “U.S. Seeks to keep Oman Bases Despite Anxieties about Iran”, World Tribune.com , February 27, 2007, <http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/07/front2454159.265972222.html> accessed on January 29, 2013.

44. Cordesman, n.39,, pp.5-6.

45. Noort,

46. “Military Bases That U.S. Could Use”, Military.com, September 26, 2001, http://www.military.com/Content/MoreContent?file=FL_militarybases_092601, accessed on January 30, 2013.

Base as the hub for distributing Avgas⁴⁷ to various locations throughout the theatre.⁴⁸ Oman allows the US military to use the Masirah air base, and the Thumrait naval air base for anti-submarine patrol planes. It has allowed, and worked with, the US Air Force to ensure that the base al-Masanah (Mussanah), northwest of Muscat is built to American standards and can be used by American warplanes. Oman has long been a strong supporter of the US military presence in the Gulf.⁴⁹ The air base at al-Mussanah will boost operating efficiency.⁵⁰

In fact, the relationship between Oman and the US has been beneficial for both. If the US has helped Oman in its defence procurement⁵¹, it has also benefitted from its strategic location and its balanced and pragmatic relationship with Iran. Not only has Oman rebuffed efforts by the other Gulf states to persuade it to distance itself from Iran politically, in 2010, it reportedly signed a security pact with Iran.⁵² The pact reportedly commits the two to hold joint military exercises and war-games. In fact, in January 2013, the naval forces of both sides held joint rescue and relief drills in Iran's southern territorial waters.⁵³ On the occasion of the 34th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution of Iran on February 4, Ali Akbar Sibeveih, Iran's new ambassador to Oman, hailed the Oman-Iran relationship. He said that Oman has been playing a positive role in the West Asian region to strengthen the

47. Avgas (aviation gasoline) is an aviation fuel used to power piston-engine aircraft.

48. "US Predator Air Base in Oman", June 25, 2009, <http://virtualglobetrotting.com/map/us-predator-air-base-in-oman/>, accessed on February 5, 2013.

49. David Isenberg, "The Ever-Growing US Military Footprint", *Asia Times Online*, June 10, 2003, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/EF10Ak01.html, accessed on January 29, 2013.

50. "Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) Royal Oman Air Force (ROAF)", Global Security.org, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/oman-af.htm>, accessed on January 12, 2013.

51. U.S. has strong strategic interest in ensuring that Southern Gulf arms purchases are standardised with the U.S., that military facilities and infrastructure are equipped to support US power projection capabilities. From a narrow commercial viewpoint, it has the same selfish interest in selling arms as everyone else. Cordesman, n.39, p.10.

52. Parliament Approves Iran-Oman Security Pact", *Fars News Agency*, December 19, 2010, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8909281036>, accessed on February 5, 2013.

53. "Iran, Oman hold Joint Naval Rescue and Relief Exercises", *Iran English Radio Services*, January 22, 2013, <http://english.trib.ir/news/political4/item/105527-iran,-oman-hold-joint-naval-rescue-and-relief-exercises> accessed on February 6, 2013.

stability and security of the region.⁵⁴ Interestingly, despite having a strong relationship with the US, Oman has been able to maintain its diplomatic independence unlike other countries like Saudi Arabia. Regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, Oman had warned the US and Europe of aggravating the issue. The sultanate has made it clear that it has no reason not to believe in Iran's assurances that its programme has purely civilian purposes.⁵⁵ This firmness on Sultan Qaboos's part needs to be taken seriously by the US as permission to use the air bases in Oman lies with the Omani authority.

The U.S. is facing problems regarding its military bases in other parts of the world. For instance, in early 2009, Kyrgyzstan ordered a US base in that country to close, allegedly because of Russian pressure, and US reluctance to meet the Kyrgyz requests for increased lease payments. An agreement on the US to continue use of the Manas transit centre⁵⁶ was reached in June 2009⁵⁷ with the rent amounting \$60 million a year. However, in October 2011, Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev, and on March 2012, Busurmankul Tabaldiev, the secretary of the country's Defense Council emphasised on seeking to close the base when the lease of the US runs out in July 2014. This creates a potential hurdle to American plans to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014.⁵⁸ The reason for the closure of the Kyrgyz base may be different from any future such fissure with Oman, but the essential aspect is that the US needs to be careful about its dealing with these countries. Hence, the US will try not to disturb such arrangements as the repercussion will be

54. In fact, he hoped that other countries of the region would follow in Oman's friendly policy. "Oman Plays Positive Role in the Region, Iran Envoy", *The Iran Project*, February 6, 2013, <http://theiranproject.com/blog/2013/02/06/oman-plays-positive-role-in-the-region-iran-envoy/> accessed on February 11, 2013.

55. Taylor Heyman, "The Sultan, Uncle Sam and the Ayatollah", April 10, 2012, <http://www.catch21.co.uk/2012/04/the-sultan-uncle-sam-and-the-ayatollah>, accessed on February 5, 2013.

56. The base is close to the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, and has been a vital hub for troops and matériel moving in and out of Afghanistan. It is the only such base that American forces have in Central Asia. Elisabeth Bumiller, "Kyrgyzstan Wants Military Role to End at U.S. Base", *The New York Times*, March 13, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/14/world/asia/panetta-meets-with-military-officials-in-kyrgyzstan.html?_r=0 accessed on March 21, 2013.

57. Jim Nichol, "Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests", CRS Report for Congress, September 19, 2012, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33458.pdf>, accessed on January 30, 2013.

58. Bumiller, "Kyrgyzstan Wants Military Role", *The New York*.

XXX

heavy on the US. At the same time, Oman needs to be prudent in drawing its line of firmness as it depends on the US for its defence procurement and training⁵⁹. With the vulnerability of this region, Oman is trying to strengthen its defence system, including its air power.

OMAN'S AIR POWER

During the decade after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, all the Gulf states set out to strengthen their armed forces by converting to the most modern weapons they could obtain and assimilate. By 1993, each state had at least a modest inventory of tanks and other armoured equipment, air defence missiles, combat aircraft, armed helicopters, and missile-armed naval craft with which to deter an intruder.⁶⁰ After the second Gulf War, Oman proposed an army of its own to reduce its dependence on Western forces.⁶¹ It was initially dependent on the U.K. and later on the U.S. Even now, there is a level of dependency, but with the help of these two countries and others, it has managed to maintain a healthy defence system. It maintains the third largest armed force in the GCC states. Its force is widely considered to be one of the best trained, though it needs an upgrade in its equipment. Towards that end, Oman

59. Countries in the region have been taking more steps in their own defence, including buying American-made air defence systems and other weaponry. Thom Shanker, Eric Schmitt and David E. Sanger, "U.S. Adds Forces in Persian Gulf, a Signal to Iran", *The New York Times*, July 3, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/03/world/middleeast/us-adds-forces-in-persian-gulf-a-signal-to-iran.html?hp&pagewanted=print&_r=0 accessed on January 29, 2013. The Gulf states recognize that a lucky conventional missile could create havoc in some of their states if it hit key oil-related infrastructure, or damaged the larger and more nebulous target of business confidence. "Gulf States Arming Against Iran Threat", *Weapon and Technology*, <http://weapons.technology.youngster.com/2011/01/gulf-states-arming-against-iran-threat.html> accessed on January 29, 2013.

60. Oman-Military Capabilities of the Persian Gulf States, http://www.mongabay.com/history/oman/oman-military_capabilities_of_the_persian_gulf_states.html accessed on January 28, 2013.

61. Wippel, n.27, p.2. Oman counts among the small oil producers in the Gulf area, and for a long time, its per capita income lagged behind its wealthier neighbours. Still today, according to many interlocutors, Oman pursues a development path more focussed on steadiness than the more glamorous Dubai model, which it regards as neither sustainable nor consistent with cultural values. Ibid, p.3.

XXX

is taking steps to expand and, modernising with purchases, and technical and human resources support from the U.S, U.K., Europe, to an extent Russia, and recently, Singapore and China as well. In an effort to modernise its air force, in October 2001, Oman purchased U.S.-made F-16 C/D (single seat and two seat) aircraft.⁶² In fact, along with associated weapons (Harpoon and AIM), a podded reconnaissance system, and training were added to the sale. The deliveries were completed in 2006. This purchase was made by Oman to keep up with its Gulf neighbors, including the UAE and Bahrain that had bought F-16s.

In July 2006, according to the Defence Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), Oman bought the Javelin anti-tank system from the U.S. Regarding purchases from other countries, in the past four years, Oman has continued to buy some British equipment, including the Typhoon fighter aircraft and patrol boats. It has also bought some Chinese-made armoured personnel carriers and other gear.⁶³ Importance is been given to the air force of Oman.⁶⁴ The Jebel Akhdar campaign of 1958-59 had made the supremacy of air power obvious. Later on, the many clashes that took place between the West Asian countries, and also between the U.S. and Iraq, shown the

62. Oman's current air defence system does have a larger command and control network, backed by radars. It appears that the new system seems to involve layered defence. The new systems will be useful for protecting national infrastructure, as well as key military bases. "Oman Upgrading its Air Defenses", *Defense Industry Daily*, October 20, 2011, <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/Oman-Upgrading-its-Air-Defenses-07161/> accessed on February 9, 2013.

63. Katzman, "Oman" ,n.35, p.8.

64. Oman, till the instability it faced did not rely on air power as a major combatant element. The new air arm which was established on 1959 was initially equipped with a variety of liaison and transport aircraft. But with the start of the Dhofar Rebellion in 1962 extensive use in the close air support role was used by Oman. In fact, through the construction of a modern Integrated Air Defence System (IADS) with the help of British Aerospace, the Sultanate of Oman Air Force (SOAF) was transformed into a modern air force. Airfields were linked together by a centrally-controlled communications system and an early warning radar control and reporting network was established. A new Control and Reporting Centre (CRC) was established and existing CRCs and sector operations centres were upgraded and improved. In 1990 SOAF was renamed as the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO). But increased tensions in the region saw Oman deciding to expand its fast jet force. The Omani F-16s also have a vital reconnaissance role, using the BAE Systems' Airborne Reconnaissance System (ARS). n.13.

vitality of air power. Nonetheless, Oman is trying to have a balanced form of defence system.⁶⁵ Although it is not starkly apparent, in view of the type of purchases being ordered and bought regarding aircraft, the importance being given to air power is evident. Apart from the purchases, Oman's selection of countries for both purchase and training also reveals the influence of its unique foreign policy. The very fact that it has diversified its purchase from various countries is sufficient proof of this.

Apart from the U.S, U.K. and Europe, Singapore Technologies Aerospace⁶⁶ has been awarded a contract to maintain and upgrade the C-130 Hercules transport aircraft fleet of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO). The selection of Singapore was explained as brief based on the company's expertise regarding the aircraft and its designation as a one-stop centre for the C-130 Hercules. The company's ability to undertake depot level maintenance and cockpit modernisation simultaneously will prove advantageous to Oman, as it will minimise the downtime and improve the aircraft availability of the Omani fleet. Built by Lockheed Martin, the C-130⁶⁷ aircraft is a four-engine turboprop military transport aircraft designed to conduct airborne assault, search and rescue, scientific research support, weather reconnaissance, aerial refuelling, maritime patrol and aerial fire-fighting missions. The upgrade is expected to improve the aircraft's navigation ability through Communications, Navigation, Surveillance / Air Traffic Management (CNS/ATM)-regulated air-space worldwide, in addition to enhancing its operational readiness, despatch reliability and operational efficiency.⁶⁸

65. The new system appears to involve layered defence, using mobile Avenger short-range systems, and medium-range SL-AMRAAM systems. "Oman Upgrading", *Defense Industry*.

66. Singapore Industries have earlier upgraded the Hunter FGA.73A/Bs with the Tracor AN/ALE-40 chaff/flare dispensers, LORAN navigation equipment and extra wing pylons to allow carriage of the AIM-9P Sidewinder air-to-air missile. n.13

67. Oman on August 2012 successfully tested the upgraded new C-130J that would be used to support internal country operations. Its ability to operate out of remote austere airstrips would be invaluable for Oman. "Oman's new C-130J takes flight", Arabian Aerospace Online News Service, August 15, 2012, <http://www.arabianaerospace.aero/oman-s-new-c-130j-Takes-Flight.html> accessed on February 12, 2013. On September 2012 the first C-130J Super Hercules was formally accepted by Oman. "Oman accepts first Super Hercules", *Arabian Aerospace Online News Service*, September 7, 2012, <http://www.arabianaerospace.aero/oman-accepts-first-super-hercules.html>, accessed on February 12, 2013.

68. "Singapore Technologies Aerospace wins RAFO C130 Aircraft Contract", *Airforce Technology*. Com, January 18 2013, <http://www.airforce-technology.com/news/newssingapore-technologies-aerospace-c130-aircraft-contract/> accessed on January 31, 2013.

RAFO is equipped with advanced fighter, interceptor and other aircraft, as well as anti-aircraft missiles and modern radar, defence and weapons systems to ensure a high level of combat proficiency at all times and in all circumstances. In addition to its F-16 fighters⁶⁹, RAFO's combat capability was reinforced by a number of Hawk and Jaguar aircraft along with Super Lynx⁷⁰ and NH-90 helicopters, that have provided back-up for the Royal Navy of Oman in protecting the coastline as well as offering support services for members of the public in the mountain areas. To enhance their skills, expertise and also maintain their friendliness, they take part in exercises with the air forces of the GCC states⁷¹ and other friendly countries⁷² like the U.S., U.K., India and also Iran. On January 2013, Oman confirmed the order of Eurofighter Typhoons⁷³ and BAE Hawk Advanced Jet Trainers (AJTs) (whose delivery will begin from 2017). The order for the Typhoons and Hawks was placed in order to upgrade the air defence and offence system. The Typhoons will be replacing the aging Jaguar strike aircraft, while the Hawk AJTs will be supplementing or replacing the Hawk Mk103/203s. The Typhoons will be fitted with long range Active Electronically Scanned Airway (AESA) radar.⁷⁴ The RAFO also signed a deal for C-295 aircraft for

69. The F-16 Fighting Falcon is a multi-role jet fighter, designed initially as an air superiority day fighter, which later evolved into a successful all-weather multi-role aircraft. "Oman Requests F-16 A/C Weapon Sale from US", Airforce Technology.com, December 17, 2012, <http://www.airforce-technology.com/news/newsoman-requests-f-16-ac-weapon-sale-from-us/> accessed on January 31, 2013.

70. Oman was the first customer in the Middle East for the new CTS800-engined Lynx, and was the first customer to operate the aircraft in a multi-role configuration, equipped for a wide range of overland and maritime roles including utility and troop transport as well as search and rescue and coastal patrol. "Small Air Force", *Arabian Aerospace*.

71. The Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) currently is participating in joint drill 'Tadhamun 15' and Peninsula Shield, being implemented by the GCC Naval Forces in the territorial waters of Kuwait. The drill lasts till February 28. Participation in the drill comes as part of RNO's training plans that aim at exchanging naval expertise, sustaining its fleet's level of readiness and implementing its national tasks. "Royal Navy of Oman takes part in GCC drill", *Muscat Daily*, February 9, 2013, <http://military.einnews.com/article/136323842> accessed on February 11, 2013.

72. "RAFO", <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/oman-af.htm>, accessed on January 29, 2013

73. Oman wants the Typhoons to become the country's high-end air superiority fighters, with a secondary strike role behind the more versatile Falcons. "Oman's Air Force Upgrades", *Defense Industry*.

74. Chris Pocock, "Oman Buys Typhoons and Hawks in \$3.75 Billion Deal", *AINOnline*, January 4, 2013, <http://military.einnews.com/article/130693151> accessed on February 11, 2013.

both tactical transport and maritime patrolling. The aircraft will enhance Oman's ability to patrol its territorial waters and conduct missions against piracy, illegal immigration and smuggling.⁷⁵ The upgradation of Omani defence capabilities can be presumed as alertness for the future. The selection of aircraft and defence mechanisms will help Oman to thwart any threat from Iran or the volatility of Persian Gulf; for instance, the F-16 aircraft with its multi-role features is capable of protecting Oman's aerial and surface security whereas the C-295s are capable of protecting the maritime trade.

With the upcoming of Gwadar port in Pakistan, Oman's position for itself and also for the U.S., the West and China becomes critical. This port has the potential to sow the seed for the reemergence of a neo-Cold War, not between the U.S. and Russia, but the between U.S. and China.

GWADAR PORT

Interestingly, Gwadar was under the possession of the Omanis and was sold to Pakistan for \$3 million on September 8, 1958. Gwadar is a former fishing village in the southwestern province of Balochistan whose 47-ft-deep warm-water port is the only one in Pakistan capable of handling big cargo ships.⁷⁶ Sitting at the entrance of the oil-rich Persian Gulf and the strategic Gulf of Oman, Gwadar⁷⁷ is Pakistan's alternate economic, military and strategic base to the already saturated Karachi and Bin Qasim ports, as well as an efficient alternative to the Iranian port of Chah Bahar – a port designed to capture the lucrative Central Asian trade corridor. Earlier, it was Soviet Union which was eyeing this area. Currently, it is China which has its eyes on it, though subtly. Control of the port of Gwadar will provide access

75. "Oman Orders Eight Airbus Military C-295 Aircraft", *Arabian Aerospace Online News Service*, May 21, 2012, <http://www.arabianaerospace.aero/oman-orders-eight-airbus-military-c295-aircraft.html>, accessed on February 13, 2013.

76. Jeremy Page, "Beijing Agrees to Operate a Key Port, Pakistan Say", *Pakistan for Peace*, <http://pakistanisforpeace.wordpress.com/2011/05/20/beijing-agrees-to-operate-a-key-port-pakistan-say/>, accessed on January 10, 2013.

77. An obscure fishing village a few years ago, Gwadar warm-water port's inaugural by the Chinese Vice-Premier Wu Bangguo on March 22, 2002, marked its entrance into the list of the world's most important economic and strategic locations in a big way. Gwadar port became functional on December 21, 2008, with the arrival of a large ship carrying fertiliser. "PNS Gwadar", *Global Security.org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/pakistan/pns-gwadar.htm> accessed on January 10, 2013.

to the warm waters of the Persian Gulf. It will also give a country access to the Arabian Sea ports, access to the Indian Ocean, and the opportunity to threaten the Persian Gulf oil supply routes.⁷⁸

The port is only about 400 km away from the Strait of Hormuz. Hence, the recent development of handing over the charge of this port's management to China by Pakistan has to be seen from a strategic perspective. Management of Gwadar port, around 600km from Karachi and close to Pakistan's border with Iran, is being handed over to state-run Chinese Overseas Port Holdings after previously being managed by Singapore's PSA International. When complete, the port is seen as opening up an energy and trade corridor from the Gulf, across Pakistan to western China, and can also be used by the Chinese Navy.⁷⁹ However, Pakistan maintains that the port is for its own access and its own navy and clarifies that it has taken China's help because of its financial incapacity.⁸⁰

The effect of this development, seen in the context of Oman, is interesting. The port will enhance Oman's importance for the U.S. and West, especially because of its Masirah Island. If a conflictual situation arises between the U.S. and China, and China uses the Gwadar port as its base, then Masirah air base will be crucial for the U.S. to launch its air campaigns. In such a scenario, Oman's security vulnerabilities will increase. However, seeing the upgradation of Oman's defence system, especially the choices it has made to strengthen its air and naval power, is evidence of Oman's alertness to handle any situation.

In these circumstances, the extent of the development of a bilateral

78. Ibid.

79. "Decision to Hand Over Gwadar Port to China Worries India", Dawn.com, February 7, 2013, <http://dawn.com/2013/02/07/decision-to-hand-over-gwadar-port-to-china-worries-india/> accessed on February 8, 2013. China has also funded ports in Hambantota, Sri Lanka, and Chittagong in Bangladesh, both India's neighbours. The development of this port is more serious as explained by an Indian analyst because it gives China base facilities. Ibid.

80. Gwadar was developed by the Chinese government at a cost of \$288 million which was later handed over to Singapore's PSA International under a 40-year agreement in 2007 for management, operations, maintenance and development. SPA and its partners could not fulfill contractual obligations including investment of \$775 million due to some reasons. "Handing over Gwadar port to China best solution: PEW", *Pakistan Today*, September 11, 2012, <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2012/09/11/news/national/handing-over-gwadar-port-to-china-best-solution-pew/> accessed on February 1, 2013.

relationship between Oman and China is crucial. Will Oman carry on with its pragmatic foreign policy and extend a friendly hand to China? China will try to take advantage of this by extending both economic and military help to Oman. In all these developments, India's position remains vital.

OMAN-INDIA RELATIONSHIP

Oman and India have always maintained a close relationship, which has been strengthened by the 700,000-strong Indian diaspora, which has contributed to the development of Oman's economy and services, including health care. Also, in December 2005, the countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on defence cooperation, calling for an "exchange of expertise in military training and information technology, utilization of military and educational courses and programs, exchange of observers attending military exercises and exchange of formal visits."⁸¹ The cooperation also focusses on anti-piracy operations. The defence relationship between both countries began in 1972 when a military protocol was signed. In fact, India and Oman hold air and naval exercises, as part of India's efforts to build strategic ties with Oman whose ports have been utilised by the Indian Navy frigates on anti-piracy duty off the Gulf of Aden. Meanwhile, Oman has stepped up its security arrangements with India, especially after 2008, due to the regional and security situations.⁸²

India's peninsular dimension places it adjacent to one of the most vital sea lanes of the world stretching from the Suez Canal and the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca through which 55,000 ships and much of the oil from the Gulf region transits each year. India's location at the base of continental Asia and the top of the Indian Ocean gives it a vantage point in relation to both Central Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Additionally, India's size, strategic location, trade links and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) links its security environment directly with the extended neighbourhood of Central Asia, Southeast Asia, the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. These strategic-

81. Lefebvre, n.6.

82. "Second India-Oman Joint Air Exercises End", *The Hindu*, October 22, 2011, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article2562726.ece> accessed on February 18, 2013.

economic factors impose an increasingly larger responsibility on India.⁸³

For India, Oman remains an important country not only for its trade and economy but also for the presence of the large number of Indian expatriates, and for the security of the sea lanes of communication in the Western Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. The relationship between the two countries is crucial for both in terms of strategic locations and security vulnerabilities. To contain India, Pakistan, with the upcoming Gwadar port, will try to block this route through China as it has done in north and northwest Siachen (if a conflicting scenario rises). If a scenario like this were to emerge, Oman's position will be crucial, especially for India. Will Oman allow India's air power to protect its maritime security by diverting the route via the Gulf of Oman and Masirah Island to the Arabian Sea?

Fig 3



83. "Annual Report 2011-2012", Ministry of Defence Government of India, pp.1-254, <http://mod.nic.in/reports/AR-eng-2012.pdf>, accessed on February 18, 2013.

In the past, Indian officials have expressed concern on China's plans to use Gwadar as a staging post for naval operations in the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and beyond. Pakistani officials says that Gwadar will be a trade hub for Central Asia and a transit point for Chinese oil imports, most of which are now shipped via the Malacca Strait, making them vulnerable to piracy or naval blockades. China and Pakistan also have discussed plans to build an oil pipeline from Gwadar to northwestern China, and two new stretches of railway lines extending the Pakistani network to Gwadar at one end, and the Chinese border at the other. Some US and Indian military officials see Gwadar more as part of the so-called "string of pearls" naval strategy, wherein China has also funded construction or upgrades of ports in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar.⁸⁴

CONCLUSION

Oman's position as a strategic country will remain significant as long the Strait of Hormuz and natural resources, specifically oil, remain vital for the world. It will be vital for the strategic interests of the US and the West as well as those of India, China and Pakistan in the East. Ironically though, Oman's strategic location also brings security vulnerabilities. Nonetheless, with the sultan's adroit diplomacy, Oman's position, till now, is safeguarded. The development and upgradation of Omani defence capabilities proves the farsightedness of Sultan Qaboos to handle the threat perceptions from Iran and neighbouring volatile states and countries.

With the upcoming Gwadar port, Oman needs to be alert and self sufficient in protecting itself. It may need to project its power in future skirmishes such as a standoff between the US and China near Gwadar port, since Oman's strategic location will play a vital role for both parties. The sultan has been trying to strengthen his country, keeping in mind the volatility of circumstances surrounding Oman. For example, the significance of Salalah port: the Omanis believe that in the future this port is destined to be one of the most important container terminals of the world. Large freighters coming from Europe or North America will offload their shipments at

84. Page, "Beijing Agrees to Operate".

Salalah, where these products will be processed, reassembled and loaded onto ships headed to various final destinations in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf.⁸⁵ Now with Gwadar port's construction, this Omani port will be of great significance. It will be interesting to see a strong bilateral or trilateral relationship among Oman, Pakistan and China, which may not go down well with the US. India will try to bolster its bilateral relations with Oman and engage more to keep the route open for energy and trade transits.

Many academics and leading policy-makers give credit to the UAE and Qatar for their rising power as small states. However, the location of Oman and the role of its unique foreign policy in maintaining peace and stability in the region should not be overlooked.

85. Lefebvre, n.6.