



View Point

Iran's assertiveness on disputed islands rattles UAE

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Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinezhad made a surprise visit to the disputed Abu Musa Island in the Persian Gulf in mid-April. The visit caused rumblings in the UAE's political and media circles. Taking a strong view, the UAE recalled its ambassador and accused Iran of 'occupation' and 'flagrant violation' of its sovereignty. Echoing similar sentiments, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League too condemned the visit and termed it provocative. Iran responded by calling the visit an 'internal Iranian matter' and explained that the Iranian President and his cabinet members usually undertake tours to different provinces, and the visit to Abu Musa was part of such routine tours. It also retorted that its Arab neighbours are 'interfering' in the country's domestic affairs at the West's behest. The US has also slammed Ahmadinezhad over the visit and urged a peaceful resolution of the dispute.

The UAE-Iran longstanding dispute over the three islands of the Persian Gulf – Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb – is primarily due to their strategic location and potential hydrocarbon deposits. Because of the underwater topography, large ships have to transit the water around these islands, giving an advantage to the country controlling them. Earlier, the islands were under British control but after their withdrawal from the region in 1971, Iran signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Sharjah, and Abu Musa, the only inhabited island of the three, was placed under joint administration. The sovereignty issue was left unsettled by both the parties.

Meanwhile, Iran took control of Greater and Lesser Tunbs before the UAE came into existence. The sequence of events was as follows: the British withdrew from the Strait of Hormuz on 30 November 1971; Iran took control of these islands on the same night; the UAE, consisting of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Umm al-Qaiwain, Fujairah and Ajman was formed on 2 December 1971. The Ras Al Khaimah emirate joined the grouping on 10 February 1972. The UAE opposed the Iranian action and asserted its claims on these islands on the ground that these were administered by the Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah's ruling families, which were now the UAE's constituents.

In view of the recent heightened tension in the Gulf region due to the controversial Iranian nuclear programme, the strategic importance of these islands close to the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately one-fifth of the world's oil transits daily, has further increased. The West and Israel's rhetoric of military measures against Iran and "all options on the table" over the country's nuclear dossier led Iran to threaten that it can choke the Strait. In this context, Ahmadinezhad's visit to Abu Musa can be seen as a warning and show of strength to the West and Israel that in case of any eventuality Iran is capable of executing the threat.

From the Iranian perspective, the visit to the disputed island may be a response to the UAE's recently-built Habshan-Fujairah pipeline project, which would transport oil from its western coast to the eastern coast terminals, completely bypassing the Strait of Hormuz. The Chinese-built 360 kilometre pipeline, expected to be operational in two-three months, would enable the UAE to directly sell oil from the Gulf of Oman, ease some traffic in the busy Strait and give the Emirates the strategic advantage of accessing the Indian Ocean. The prospects of other Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Kuwait joining the overland pipeline, resulting into the diminished strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz, may also have antagonized Iran.

The Iranian domestic-political condition provides an interesting perspective to the timing of Ahmadinezhad's visit, which was the first visit by any Iranian President. During the March parliamentary (Majlis) elections, the candidates supported by Ahmadinezhad fared poorly against those of Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i's. Besides, for the first time in the Islamic Republic's history the President was

summoned by members of Parliament to answer their questions on ‘mismanagement’ of the country’s economy. Both these developments severely dented the President’s image and prestige. Ahmadinezhad, probably foreseeing the regional Arab reactions to his visit, which would then automatically lead to an upsurge in nationalistic sentiments in the country, carefully timed the visit prior to the 4 May run-off for the 65 remaining Majlis seats in order to translate the fervour into votes for his candidates. Though the run-off results might not be very encouraging for him, the President has certainly bounced back to the spotlight since the visit. Another view is that the visit was a calculated move by the President to distract the public opinion from rampant inflation and economic hardships faced by the people reeling under the Western sanctions.

In the near future, there are no signs of the dispute being resolved. Instead, the tension may escalate as Sharjah promises to start a ferry service to Abu Musa, and Iran proposes to develop it into a regional tourism hub. There is also a difference in approach: Iran says it is ready for a dialogue with the UAE to resolve ‘possible misunderstandings’ but the UAE wants to take the matter to the International Court of Justice.

India is a close friend of the UAE and Iran. It has substantial economic stakes in both the countries. While Iran supplies a significant percentage of oil, India has become the largest trading partner for the UAE. If approached by the either parties, New Delhi can mediate and help resolve the problem before it becomes an international issue. This may increase India’s stature regionally and globally.

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