



MEI-ISAS PANEL DISCUSSION (WEBINAR)

Beyond the Chokepoints: New Geopolitics of Arabian Seaports

9 June 2021, Wednesday | 3.00pm – 4.30pm (SG Time)

Programme

3.00pm **Welcome Remarks**
Dr Amit Ranjan
Research Fellow
Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS)
National University of Singapore

3.05pm **Panel Discussion**
Chairperson
Dr Ameem Lutfi
Research Fellow
Middle East Institute (MEI)
National University of Singapore

Panellists

Dr Hafeez Jamali
Additional Secretary
Government of Balochistan, Pakistan

Dr Yousuf Al Bulushi
EPCm Operation Interfaces Head
Petrofac, Oman

Dr Mohsen Solhdoost
The University of Queensland
Brisbane, Australia

3.50pm **Discussion**

4.30pm **End of Event**

About the Panel Discussion

Around one-sixth of the global oil supply moves through the Strait of Hormuz, making this chokepoint perhaps the most crucial 21 miles in the world. Any minor disturbance or turmoil in these narrow waters can create ripples strong enough to rock the global economy. The US and its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation allies have long-held open and safe passage through the strait as their primary Middle East foreign policy goal. To secure these 21 miles, they built military bases all around the Gulf, stationed one of the largest floating bases with the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain and struck alliances with Arab monarchs to lay the foundation of the region's political dynamics. However, several recent infrastructural developments immediately to the east are set to move us beyond this chokepoint politics. Oman, Pakistan, and Iran — otherwise minor players in the oil game — have built, with the help of sizeable foreign investments, thoroughly modern ports in Duqm, Gwadar and Chahbahar. While unique in their own way, each of these ports shares the same advantage over the current leading ports in the region — they circumvent the strait to open into the Arabian Sea, which is much more difficult to obstruct.

This panel discussion will explore the broader implications of this possible shift by analysing the following:

- What will a region built around channelling traffic through the Arabian Sea, instead of protecting the Strait of Hormuz, look like?
- Are the oil-producing Gulf states going to support these projects to reduce vulnerabilities to oil flows? Can we see a more earnest Iran at the negotiation table if it can no longer play the blockade card?
- Will this finally allow the US to further cut back on boots on the ground in the Middle East?
- How will China regulate traffic between its open-sea ports in Oman and Pakistan?
- Will these ports maintain exclusivity or will they connect and share traffic with the Indian-backed Chahbahar port in Iran?
- Will India expand its security cooperation with the US to cover the Arabian Peninsula or pursue its own autonomous regional strategy towards Iran and other regional actors?
- How will the involved states balance between collaborating for nurturing the corridor and competing for traffic through various economic, political, and security enticements?

About the Chairperson

Dr Ameem Lutfi is a Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore. He is a historical anthropologist specialising in transnational mobility and military-labour markets. His current book project entitled *Conquest Without Rule: Baloch Portfolio-Mercenaries in the Indian Ocean* looks at state-building in the region from perspective of a diasporic group which has maintained strong presence in the military infrastructure of various states in the region since at least the 16th century despite not having a state of their own. Ameem holds a PhD in cultural anthropology from Duke University. Prior to joining MEI, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the Oriental Institute at the Czech Academy of Sciences.

About the Speakers

Dr Amit Ranjan is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. His research interests include water disputes, South Asian politics (India, Bangladesh, Maldives and Pakistan), India's regional policy and India's internal security. His papers, review essays and book reviews have been widely published in journals, including *Asian Survey*, *Asian Affairs*, *Economic & Political Weekly*, *India Review*, *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, *India Quarterly*, *Journal of Migration Affairs*, *Journal of Indian Ocean Region*, *Roundtable: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, *Social Change*, *South Asia Research*, *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* and *World Water Policy*.

Dr Hafeez Jamali is a scholar and civil servant whose research focuses on the effects of globalisation and development on the livelihoods of marginalized communities. He holds an MPA in Public Administration from the University of Victoria, Canada and a PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin. He is currently serving as Additional Secretary in the Government of Balochistan and serves as Balochistan's Focal Person to Federal Government ministries, divisions, and attached departments. He has previously taught as an Assistant Professor in the School of Arts, Sciences and Humanities at Habib

University, Pakistan and led the Interdisciplinary Development Research Center (IDRAC) at Habib University.

Dr Yousuf Al Bulushi is the EPCm Operation interfaces head at Petrofac, Oman. He worked for the same organisation as a country human resources and administration manager for six years. Furthermore, his teaching and research interests are focused on business administration, logistics, oil and gas, human resources, international, political economy, primarily related to the region. In teaching, he was involved in many national organisations as a lecturer as he lectured some finance and economic subjects in higher education. In addition to his areas of teaching, his research focuses on GCC in general and Oman specifically. He's keen about Omani politics, social and economic development —i.e., Oman's developmental plans and foreign policy. Dr Bulushi is currently doing his PhD in business administration at Bradford University.

Dr Mohsen Solhdoost completed his PhD entitled *External Support to Non-State Armed Groups and National Role Conceptions*, at the University of Queensland, Australia, in 2020. He has been working as a Lecturer and Teaching Assistant at the University of Queensland and the Australian Catholic University, teaching a wide range of international relations courses. He has published peer-reviewed articles and op-eds on Iranian foreign policy, US-Iran relations, state-sponsorship of proxies and geopolitics of the Middle East.

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