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This article attempts to explain why President Richard Nixon embraced the idea of Iranian primacy in the Persian Gulf, whereas his predecessor President Lyndon B. Johnson had rejected it. It contends that this important shift in American policy cannot be adequately explained by the facts of the British withdrawal from the Gulf and America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. These conditions were present when both presidents held office and therefore this explanation is insufficient; the policy change also reflected a shift in American thinking about Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

Johnson favored a “balance of power” between Iran and Saudi Arabia as a means of ensuring security in the Gulf. He, in effect, inherited the British policy. He, as other American presidents before him, considered the Gulf region as falling within the British sphere of influence and as such its security to be Britain’s responsibility. For more than a century *Pax Britannica* had ruled the Gulf, and the British Empire had created a string of Arab protectorates in the lower part of the Gulf, treaties with them protected the British lifeline to India. In anticipation of the 1971 withdrawal of British forces “East of Suez,” including the Persian Gulf, Britain also aimed to create a single Arab federation out of these protectorates as a counterweight to the Shah’s ambition of dominance in the region.

Needless to say, the Shah vehemently opposed the balancing policy. To him the demise of the British Empire would provide a golden opportunity for Iran to rule the waters of the Persian Gulf once again as had the ancient Persian Empire. The British scheme of creating an Arab federation irked the Shah as he claimed sovereignty over three islands near the strategic Strait of Hormuz, the global chokepoint for transport of Gulf oil supplies to world markets. Furthermore, the Shah distrusted the British for two other reasons as well. First, like most Iranians, he detested Britain for its historical economic and political
domination of Iran and viewed the British balancing act as a conspiracy against the rise of Iranian power and influence in the Gulf. Second, he resented Britain’s invasion of Iran in 1941 and its humiliating exile of his father. In order to persuade the Johnson administration to abandon the balancing policy and to recognize instead Iran’s preeminence in the region, the Shah relentlessly depicted, in dire terms, the growing threat of the Soviet Union and of the radical Arab states, especially Soviet-backed Iraq, to the peace and security of the Gulf.

It fell to the Nixon administration, however, to abandon the balancing approach backed by Britain and to recognize Iran as the most powerful state in the Gulf region. This important policy change was in effect a consequence of a major shift in the United States policy toward the Third World. Half the way across the world from the Gulf, Nixon declared in East Asia the goal of devolution of American regional responsibilities. The United States would no longer intervene militarily in regional conflicts such as in Vietnam as a means of containing Soviet influence. Instead, it would provide material assistance to such regional allies as Brazil, Indonesia, Iran, and others to maintain regional security, hence the birth of the “Nixon Doctrine.” The president wrote the Shah in February 1970 that he shared his view that Iran should play an important role in the new doctrine. This prospect was manna from heaven for the shah. He could now buy from the U.S. as many conventional weapons as he wanted.

This article emphasizes the long-standing friendship between the Shah and Nixon as a major factor in American recognition of Iran as the key player in the Gulf, a friendship that dated back to 1953 after the American overthrow of the government of Mohammad Musaddiq. Nixon found the Shah to be “decisive, confident, strong, kind and thoughtful” (p.348). The Shah’s fierce anti-communism also appealed to Nixon. But Kissinger downplayed the friendship factor in the American support of the Shah’s expansive ambitions in the Gulf. As quoted in this article, Kissinger wrote afterwards that “America’s friendship with Iran reflected not individual proclivities but geopolitical realities. Iran’s intrinsic importance transcended the personalities of both countries’ leaders” (p.361).

This brief review is a snapshot of a comprehensive, well-documented, and lucidly written article. It contributes uniquely to an understanding of the change in the United States Gulf policy during the presidencies of Johnson and Nixon. It illuminates for the first time how that change made it possible for Iran to play the role of the guardian of Gulf security. This reviewer is especially pleased to note that the author refutes the myth that the shah was “a pliant third world client of the United States during the global Cold War.”(p.372). Nearly a half century ago this reviewer demonstrated that even during World War II, when Iran was occupied by foreign powers, it was no mere pawn in the game of great powers; it made its own foreign policy decisions.1

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In arguing that the change in American policy toward Iran from Johnson to Nixon reflected a shift in American thinking about Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the author might have noted the sharp difference between the worldviews of these two presidents, instead of invoking as evidence Kissinger’s positive view of the Shah as a ‘statesman’ rather than an ‘upstart’ whose policies threatened rather than helped in Gulf security.

Nixon, as a conservative Republican president, was a power realist: in dealing with Iran he emphasized military power rather than social, economic, and political development. He went so far as to claim that American-style democracy was not the best form of government for Third World countries like Iran because they have entirely different political cultures. No wonder the Shah always felt more comfortable in dealing with Republican than Democratic presidents. Nixon answered the Shah’s persistent request for arms. He promised to sell the Shah all the conventional weapons he wanted, as indeed he did.

In contrast, Johnson, as a liberal Democratic president, thought the Shah’s relentless pressure for unbridled arms purchases must be resisted because excessive expenditure on arms would jeopardize Iran’s social and economic development. In fact Johnson’s predecessor, John F. Kennedy, had initiated such critical thinking about the Shah. In dealing with the Shah, President Kennedy emphasized human rights, social and economic development, and the need for political democratization. All this had irked the Shah, who refused to open up the Iranian political system, continued repression, and launched an autocratic and self-serving “White Revolution.”

In retrospect, there is little doubt that Nixon’s support of the Shah’s ambition to become the policeman of the Persian Gulf, his insufficient concern about Iran’s social, economic, and political development, and his indiscriminate arms sales to Iran significantly contributed to the eruption of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The revolutionary regime that has substituted hostility for friendship with the United States for decades, alas, has turned out to be no less autocratic than the Shah’s regime. The Iranian people continue to suffer from their country’s historical justice-and-freedom deficit.

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