



THE PERSIAN GULF: TRANSITIONING TOWARDS AN INCREASINGLY COMPLEX INTERPLAY OF GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCES¹

As of July 2017, there was on average just one American carrier strike group² or amphibious ready group³ in the Persian Gulf.⁴ However, since mid-May 2019, a carrier strike group and an amphibious group have been operating conjointly in the area. Does this indicate that the US has regained its interest in the region? Is it a sign of hostilities to come? This ratcheting up of tensions should be interpreted in light of recent geopolitical changes, specifically the blurring of traditional fault lines between Saudi Arabia⁵ and its Iranian opponents. This strait covers 251,000 km² of space along a 1,000 km coastline⁶ but its average depth is only 50 m and power games between both coastal and more distant states have gradually become more and more complex as American naval power considers its potential return. The situation the United States Fifth Fleet finds itself in can therefore be compared to the Portuguese navy's in the mid-17th century or the Royal Navy's just after the Second World War, when the Persian Gulf ceased to be in exclusive control of

¹ Thomas Flichy de La Neuville, Geopolitics and Business Chair at the Rennes School of Business

² A carrier strike group is made up of approximately 7,500 men. They are mainly structured to carry out offensive missions. They are organised around aircraft carriers, which serve as the groups' key resource. Other vessels are assigned to defend the aircraft carrier and have the potential to bolster its offensive power by directing cruise missiles towards designated targets.

³ Amphibious ready groups (ARGs) can send a force of approximately 5,000 into action on land. They can operate on land or sea either by air (organised around a helicopter carrier) or by ship (using landing craft). They are armed by one of the US Marine Corps' Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs) made up of around 2,200 men with a variety of military capabilities.

⁴ The only exceptions to the rule were in early July 2018 (when the USS Iwo Jima left) and early October 2018 (when the USS Essex arrived), when no particularly imposing military unit was present in the Gulf. There still remain a few American vessels, however, including USS The Sullivans, which is undertaking security missions in the Persian Gulf.

⁵ France supplies a significant amount of arms to Saudi Arabia, which is particularly in need of the CAESAR gun-howitzers Nexter has produced for the conflict in Yemen. The Saudi monarchy is also financing Egypt's military purchases in France. Egypt's current premier, Field Marshall Fattah el-Sisi, was once a military attaché to Saudi Arabia.

⁶ This is the maritime equivalent of a country such as Italy.

one power and was, instead, shared by various influential forces.⁷ The Gulf's very brackish waters have served as a barometer for world power for as long as they have been strategically important.⁸ It remains unlikely that the Strait of Hormuz will close,⁹ depriving Western countries of 25% of their daily energy supplies.¹⁰ Yet this possibility is used to justify the presence of several warships and, even more importantly, drive trade in ships and sophisticated vehicles¹¹ to all local states.¹² Current maritime movements mean that the area has to be constantly under surveillance either by coastguards or, conversely, by ships officially out on scientific missions to study plant-life¹³ or ocean pollution.¹⁴ As America's energy dependency decreases and it turns its attention resolutely towards the Pacific, Iran is making a pragmatic assessment of competing regional navies' increasing dominance in the hope that distant forces will one day tip the Gulf's geopolitical balance in its favour.

THE USA DRIVES RENEWED NAVAL ACTIVITY

The Structure Provided by Geopolitical Opposition between Iran & Saudi Arabia

The Persian Gulf's main dividing line separates Saudi Arabia (supported by the American and European Navies) and Iran (supported by its Russian and Chinese allies). The former has the upper hand thanks to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, which uses two nuclear aircraft carriers to monitor the Gulf¹⁵. Saudi Arabia is buying highly sophisticated ships in an attempt to compensate for its lack of a naval history¹⁶ and, in particular, the difficulties it has had in training naval officers.¹⁷ As for Iran, it is purchasing Chinese corvette warships and Russian mines. The rivalry between these two powers is spilling over into tensions on sea and on land, including in Bahrein, which is the linchpin for the US' presence in the Persian Gulf but has a 65% Shi'ite population. For all the Gulf's powers, the Strait of Hormuz is a strategic

⁷ It should be noted that restrictions on the arms trade in the Persian Gulf are nothing new. In the late 19th century, British authorities in India were facing a significant rise in arms trafficking via this maritime space from East Africa towards Britain's dominion. For more information, see Guillemette Crouzet, "Déstabilisation ou renforcement de la puissance ? La Grande-Bretagne, les Indes et le trafic d'armes dans le golfe Persique à la fin du XIX^e siècle", *Stratégique* (Vol. 118, N°1, 2018), pp. 205-216.

⁸ This zone accounts for 60% of the world's oil reserves and 40% of its gas.

⁹ Between 2018 and 2019, Iran's oil exports fell from 2.5 million to 1 million barrels of unrefined oil a day. In response to pressure from the US, President Hassan Rouhani threatened to blockade oil exports coming from the Persian Gulf.

¹⁰ Philippe Boulanger, "L'Iran et le golfe Arabo-Persique", *Outre-Terre* (vol. 25-26, N°2, 2010), pp. 403-412.

¹¹ Philippe Boulanger, "Les défis géopolitiques d'une nouvelle puissance régionale : les Émirats arabes unis", *Hérodote* (vol. 133, N°2, 2009), pp. 58-91.

¹² Having the ability to blockade reduces the risk of being subjected to an all-encompassing embargo, as any state prevented from trading has nothing to lose by preventing its competitors from doing the same. Threats to blockade Iran are still vaguely mooted, without anyone expecting that they will be enacted.

¹³ Yuri Mikhalev, "Humpback whales *Megaptera novaeangliae* in the Arabian Sea", *Marine Ecology Progress Series* (vol. 149, 1997), pp. 13-21.

¹⁴ Lida Salimi and Amir Hajjali, "Determination of Heavy Metals Concentrations in Different Depths in Persian Gulf (Bandar Abbas Region) in Warm and Cold Seasons", *International Journal of Scientific Engineering and Science* (Vol. 2, 2018), pp. 12-14.

¹⁵ Since World War Two, Western oil firms' procurement activities have been crucially influential. Kévin Wursthorn, "Les compagnies pétrolières et le développement des pays du golfe Arabo-Persique dans les années 1950", *Relations internationales* (vol. 177, N°1, 2019), pp. 45-58.

¹⁶ This marks it out from the Sultanate of Oman, whose sailors have been crossing oceans since 3000 BC.

¹⁷ It bought 48 TNC 35 fast patrol boats from Germany and wants to acquire five German submarines at a cost of €2.5 billion. In July 2018, the Spanish company Navantia signed a contract with the Saudi Navy for five corvettes costing approximately €2 billion.

space.¹⁸ 20% of the world's oil supplies pass through this pinch-point. If it were to be blocked, the price of a barrel of oil could increase by 50% in a few days. This channel is divided into two 3.2 km-wide canals to preclude all risk of collision.

American Energy Independence Leads to Disengagement

Until the 2010s, energy geopolitics was based on a number of suppositions. The first was that petroleum and gas suppliers had limited reserves which eventually would not be able to meet growing global demand. Importers therefore had to establish close ties with their suppliers while also securing the maritime trade routes that connected them to the supply. These assumptions were shattered by two developments: the extraction of shale gas by hydraulic fracturing¹⁹ (or “fracking”) and the drive to limit climate change. In the future, oil will not necessarily be the biggest source of energy and its consumers will not be mostly based in the West. As for energy reserves, they will not remain indefinitely in the Middle East.²⁰ In 2017, the USA became the world's top oil producer (contributing 13% of the world's total) in a fiercely contested rivalry with Saudi Arabia and Russia – but it also produced the most natural gas, accounting for 20% of the world's supplies. America depended on foreign sources for 30.1% of its energy supplies in 2005, but this had fallen to 7.7% by 2017 thanks to both reduced consumption levels after the 2008 crash and an increase in petroleum and natural gas production made possible by horizontal drilling and fracking. The concept of an America independent of any outside energy sources has led to speculation that the USA is disengaging from the Middle East to focus on Asia-Pacific.²¹ A self-sufficient USA would no longer need to spend its time and money preserving Middle Eastern stability, an endeavour it would like to see its European allies contribute to more. It is also considering less costly means of monitoring this maritime space, such as robots. For example, a flotilla of 12 autonomous mini submarines would be able to cover the whole of the Persian Gulf.²² America's energy independence should be viewed in the context of the Gulf States' growing food dependency.²³ As their economies become increasingly vulnerable, the oil monarchies are opening up more and more foreign-trade zones in preparation for a post-petroleum world.²⁴

Weakened American Positions in the Gulf

¹⁸ Inayat Kalim, “Gwadar Port: Serving Strategic Interests of Pakistan”, *South Asian Studies, a Research Journal of South Asian Studies* (Vol. 31, N°1, January – June 2016), pp. 207-221.

¹⁹ Marie-Claire Aoun, “Le marché pétrolier à un tournant”, *Politique étrangère*, (autumn vol., N°3, 2018), pp. 119-129.

²⁰ Michael Klare, “From Scarcity to Abundance, the new Geopolitics of Energy”, *Current History* (vol. 116, no. 786, 2017), p. 3.

²¹ At the annual Asia Scrutiny Summit 2012, Leon Panetta confirmed to the assembled Asian-Pacific defence ministers that 60% of America's naval forces would be stationed in the Pacific. President Donald Trump has continued along this trajectory. In 2019, the United States declared its intention to deploy two littoral combat ships to Singapore. The extensive Balikatan military exercises between the USA and Philippines took place again in April 2019, but with much greater resources to aid them, covering amphibious and aerial operations (using the USS Wasp and F-35B Lightning II aircraft respectively) and counter-terrorism operations. This ramping up of resources gives an indication of the United States' growing commitment to its Indo-Pacific strategy. Furthermore, the United States have joined in an agreement between Australia and Papua New Guinea to develop the naval base on Manus Island so it can host more vessels.

²² Éric Martel, “Robots tueurs - la guerre déshumanisée”, *Sécurité globale* (vol. 16, N°4, 2018), pp. 89-92.

²³ Damien Calais, “Abu Dhabi au défi de la sécurité alimentaire. L'approvisionnement des villes comme expression du pouvoir et de la hiérarchie sociale”, *Revue internationale des études du développement* (vol. 237, N°1, 2019), pp. 89-114.

²⁴ Brigitte Dumortier, “Développement économique et contournement du droit : les zones franches de la rive arabe du golfe Persique”, *Annales de géographie* (vol. 658, N°6, 2007), pp. 628-644.

The Persian Gulf now appears to be of less strategic importance for the United States.²⁵ Since 2011, friction has notably increased between the USA and its partners, indicating their mutual defiance. At the start of the Arab Spring of 2011, Saudi leaders asked the USA to support Hosni Mubarak. The American administration took the opposite position by first supporting the opposition then asking Mubarak to resign. Later on, King Abdullah was alarmed by the United States' support for the Bahraini opposition. Iran took advantage of these events to promote the idea that American policy in the region was purely utilitarian and leaders who no longer served the USA's purposes would be swiftly abandoned. This unnerved the Gulf's monarchies. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, the United States promised to forge closer ties with the Gulf monarchies, but it was also then that it focused its attentions away from the region toward Asia-Pacific. The Gulf monarchies feared that an American-Iranian agreement unfavourable to them would be signed. This is why, on 11 May 2015, the Saudi King refused to attend a summit organised by Barack Obama and other Gulf Cooperation Council leaders in order to debate the Iran nuclear agreement.²⁶ In the early months of the Trump presidency, the Gulf monarchies feared that the USA would withdraw unilaterally from the region. This is why they turned towards other partners for their security. India²⁷ and China had already forged closer bonds with them since Qatar was embargoed in June 2017. In 2010, China entered into strategic dialogue with the Gulf Cooperation Council. France²⁸ and the United Kingdom reinforced their presence in the region in response to the oil monarchies' ambition to diversify.²⁹ As for Russia, it made use of the near-total embargo decreed against Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrein to strengthen its relationship with Doha. When, on 26 December 2018, Trump declared that the United States could no longer be the world's policeman and that the American interventions of the 21st century had been catastrophic, the shockwave he created cast in doubt the liberal hegemony that had been the backbone of American diplomacy since the end of the Cold War.³⁰

THE ARRIVAL OF MULTILATERALISM IN THE PERSIAN GULF

The Gulf Monarchies' Pragmatic Approach

Out of all the Gulf monarchies, two stand out for their pragmatism. The first of these is Oman, a sultanate that interfaces with the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, East Africa and India and which managed to signed a free trade agreement with the USA in 2009 while also maintaining

²⁵ Frederic Wehrey and Richard Sokolsky, "Imagining a New Security Order in the Persian Gulf", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2015.

²⁶ Simon Mabon, "L'Arabie saoudite, l'Iran et la géopolitique changeante du Moyen-Orient", *akfar/idées* (October 2015), pp. 18-20.

²⁷ The Gulf states were India's first trade partner, and the latter viewed the former as an exploitable economic backwater. Between 1890 and 1910, rich Indian merchants used Arab and Persian labour to farm pearls off the Gulf coast, which would then be traded at great profit. For more information, see Guillemette Crouzet, "A golden harvest : exploitation et mondialisation des perles du golfe Arabo-Persique (vers 1870-vers 1910)", *Revue historique* (vol. 658, N°2, 2011), pp. 327-356.

²⁸ Philippe Boulanger, "Le positionnement géostratégique de la France dans le golfe Arabo-Persique : la base interarmées d'Abu Dhabi", *Outre-Terre* (vol. 29, N°3, 2011), pp. 531-537.

²⁹ In 2017, the UK signed an agreement to sell 24 Typhoon fighter jets to Qatar. In the same year, France signed a \$14 billion contract to supply aircraft and armoured fighting vehicles.

³⁰ Pascal Boniface, "Donald Trump, syndic de faillite de l'hégémonie libérale ?", *Revue internationale et stratégique* (vol. 113, N°1, 2019), pp. 18-30.

excellent relations with Iran. As a result, it can serve as a diplomatic intermediary between two geopolitical opponents. Qatar shares a gas field with Iran and has been subject to a near-total embargo since it distanced itself from Saudi Arabia in May 2017.³¹ The blockade has led the emirate to completely review its foreign policy.³² Qatar now has to walk a very fine diplomatic line. Highly vulnerable to even the slightest confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it has the official protection of the American Navy's Eighth Fleet. As a result, Russia has taken a very discreet approach to the country. As for China, on 27 September 2017 it signed an agreement to buy anti-terrorism services from a partner which would be able to tamp down its Islamic secessionists.³³ Qatar has formed a closer relationship with Iran, but also Turkey, which has set up a permanent military base in the country.³⁴ About 8,000 Turks live in Qatar. More than 200 Turkish companies operate there too. Qatar has become an important supplier of liquefied natural gas for Turkey and there have been proposals for a large pipeline to channel Qatari gas from one to the other. Qatar has also made some special agreements with Africa and European Union.³⁵ It has won discreet support from Kuwait, which acted as a mediator between it and Saudi Arabia in 2017. The embargo placed on Qatar in June 2017 reveals the fault lines in Arab solidarity, and it has triggered new alliances which will divide competing petro-monarchies long into the future.³⁶

³¹ On 23 May 2017, Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani declared that "Iran is a regional Islamic power which cannot be ignored and it would be imprudent to enter into confrontation with it." He has described the Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah as "legitimate resistance movements" and defended Hamas.

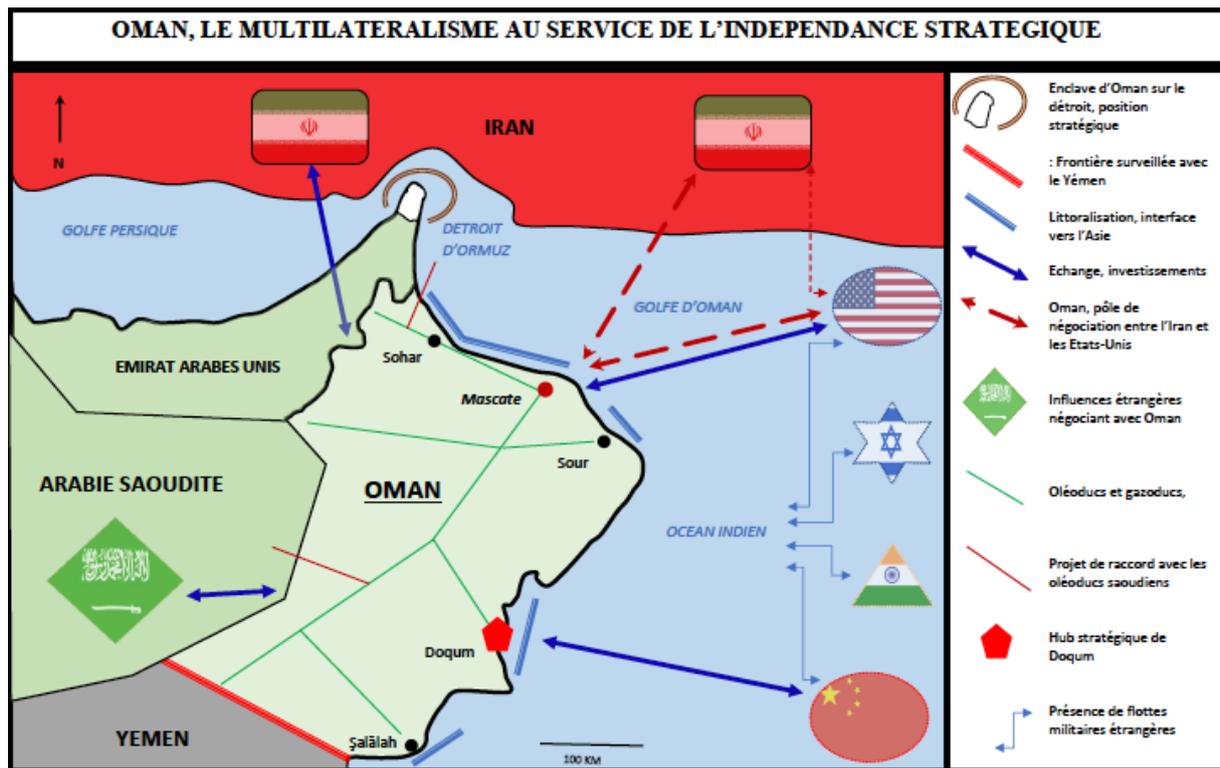
³² Rachid Chaker, "La crise du Golfe de 2017 : un an après", *Politique étrangère*, (autumn vol, N°3, 2018), pp. 77-87.

³³ Qatar is China's second biggest gas supplier, providing for more than 20% of its consumption. The country's public gas company, Qatar Petroleum, shares what it produces with Chinese subsidiaries to exploit and explore new drill sites in China. Figures show that there was 45% more trade between the two countries in the first quarter of 2018 than in the first quarter of 2017, before the embargo began. China is now exporting more goods to Qatar than the USA, while Qatari exports to China have risen by 60%.

³⁴ Closing down this Turkish base is one of the 13 conditions that a Saudi, Emirati, Egyptian and Bahraini coalition says must be met if the blockade is to be lifted, but Doha has declined to do so. It is worth noting that Turkey's base in Qatar is part of a wider project to expand Turkish influence across the Middle East. Ankara is seeking to get a foothold in the region using military bases in East Africa (and Somalia and Sudan in particular) and in the Persian Gulf.

³⁵ Between 2017 and 2018, after 18 important air traffic routes were closed down, Qatar Airways announced that it was creating 24 new flights, many of which were to Africa (including Ghana, Kenya and Cameroon) or, after Qatar and the European Commission signed an aviation agreement on 4 March 2019, to Europe. To counterbalance its constant losses, Qatar Airways has also bought 49% of Air Italy. This has enabled it to fly to the USA (specifically New York and Miami), ruffling some American feathers in the process.

³⁶ Jérôme Lavandier, "Crise entre pétromonarchies du golfe Persique : une recomposition des solidarités alimentaires arabes ?", *Confluences Méditerranée* (vol. 108, N°1, 2019), pp. 167-178.



Russia's Return to the Middle East

Russia's geopolitical objectives in the Persian Gulf could be summed up as follows:³⁷ 30 years after its retreat from the region at the start of the First Gulf War, Russia wants to contain Islamic extremism (which is liable to spread in its own and neighbouring countries); support allied regimes by forming long-term geopolitical partnerships; reduce Russian military presence in the region to a minimum; increase its share of the arms, nuclear energy, oil and gas trades; attract investment from Gulf monarchies; and keep energy prices high.³⁸ However, Russia's efforts to rebuild links with Saudi Arabia have not so far been crowned with success, the aim of this bilateral contact essentially being to put pressure on the USA.³⁹ In terms of geopolitics, Russia has developed an alternative to its sea trade route with India. The International North-South Transport Corridor links India to Russia via Iran and Azerbaijan. It runs on rail and road along the Persian Gulf's eastern coastline, following a route formerly used during Russia's imperial days.

China's Growing Presence

³⁷ Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank, *Russia in the Middle-East*, eds. Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank (The Jamestown Foundation, 2018).

³⁸ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's objectives, priorities, and policy drivers", *Task Force on US Policy Toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia project*, 2016.

³⁹ "What is Russia up to in the Middle East?", Dmitri Trenin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); and "Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin", Alexei Vassiliev (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018) in Julien Nocetti, *Politique étrangère* (winter vol., N°4, 2018), pp. 190-193.

China currently imports 20% of its petroleum from the Persian Gulf.⁴⁰ Its presence in the region is nothing new,⁴¹ but it has certainly grown. A new passage has been set up between China and the Persian Gulf via Pakistan. This 10,300 km international container route links Gilgit-Baltistan to Gwadar.⁴² The ambition to link inland powers to the Persian Gulf over land is reminiscent of the Central Powers' plans during World War I to make a rail connection between Hamburg and the Persian Gulf.⁴³ It is certainly true that this link would reduce the distance between China and the Persian Gulf.⁴⁴ Gwadar port is only 180 nautical miles from the Strait of Hormuz.

The Persian Gulf's geopolitical situation is thus changing.⁴⁵ Having lost some of its strategic value, the Gulf is an arena in which different powers joust for energy supplies, but this sea route may one day become avoidable, rendering it nothing more than a place to pass through, as it was in the 19th century.⁴⁶ The US Navy's easing away from the region has also left the way open for a three-way contest. On the one hand, there are the old, distrustful allies in the form of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. On the other is their historic Iranian foe. And between the two are the neutral opportunists: Oman, Qatar and Kuwait. It is towards the latter group that growing Asian powers looking to topple American unilateralism are instinctively turning.

⁴⁰ C. B. M. Alvarez, "De Ghawar a Palian: Diplomacia energética y estrategias corporativas en los vínculos energéticos entre el golfo Pérsico y la República Popular China, 1990-2010" *Estudios De Asia y Africa* (vol. 49, N°2, 2014), pp. 301-363.

⁴¹ In the 15th century, Admiral Zheng He brought together a flotilla of 200 ships carrying 27,000 men. It traversed the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf before reaching the East African coast.

⁴² Thierry Kellner, "La Chine et l'Asie centrale en 2017, une nouvelle étape de l'essor chinois en Eurasie", *Note d'actualité n°24/24 de l'Observatoire de la Chine* (2017-2018, January 2018).

⁴³ Nicolas Ginsburger, "André Chéradame et l'émergence d'une cartographie géopolitique de guerre en 1916". In 1916, the French journalist and specialist in central and eastern Europe and the German colonies André Chéradame (1871-1948) published *Le Plan Pangermaniste Démasqué* (or "The Pan-Germanic Plan Unmasked"). Chéradame's general proposal was to reveal to the reader an ancient, well-coordinated and secret plan formulated by Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany to set up an axis for Germanic domination running from Hamburg to the Persian Gulf. It would first connect the country to Austria-Hungary, then Bulgaria and Romania, before approaching the Ottoman Empire via a rail link to Baghdad.

⁴⁴ Sana Ullah, Muhammad Hafeez, Babar Aziz, Haseeb Ahmad, "Pakistan-China Regional Trade Potentials in the light of CPEC", *The Pakistan Journal of Social Issues*, (June 2019), pp. 109-118.

⁴⁵ Fawaz Gerges, "Le Moyen-Orient en 2029", *Politique étrangère*, (spring vol, N°1, 2019), pp. 159-172.

⁴⁶ Jean-Loup Samaan, "Les rivalités navales dans le golfe persique : acteurs et ressources", *Hérodote* (N°163, 2016), pp. 149-165.