Qatar’s Role in the Geopolitical Scenarios of the Middle East and North Africa

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Qatar is a small country (11,586 km²) with an equally small national population of around 333,000 inhabitants. It has a dry desert climate and limited groundwater and surface water. This situation is conducive to neither the emergence of agriculture nor the establishment of industry. Moreover, geographically, it is wedged between two large regional states: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which spans its entire land border, and Iran, which surrounds it almost entirely by sea. This geopolitical situation means that Qatar does not benefit from the comforts of a strong state: a large area, a large population, and a developed agricultural and industrial base. Furthermore, because the two major powers on either side of it are vying for control of the region, it likewise does not benefit from a regional system such as the one in place in Europe since the end of World War II, in which “democratic peace” prevails and small countries are protected from the hegemonic tendencies of large ones through international law and the principle of state sovereignty.

However, despite all its weaknesses, Qatar has assets that have allowed it to achieve its goals and take on an important regional role. These assets are threefold. In order of importance, the first is the presence of an ambitious ruling elite with a plan and a vision. The second is the availability of vast natural resources, in particular, natural gas. This comfortable situation makes it financially independent and helps strengthen its political autonomy vis-à-vis its two neighbours. Finally, the third is the presence of regional and international contradictions that Qatar has successfully turned to its advantage, making and unmaking alliances with a view to transforming its security needs into a regional and international necessity.

These factors allow Qatar to overcome some of its structural weaknesses, gradually replacing them with soft power, which it wields in two ways: defensively, to ward off the danger surrounding the Emirate, in the form of regional forces; and offensively, as manifested in its desire to expand its area of influence beyond its own borders, adopting a strategy that enables it to circumvent some of the structural limits associated with its size. The Qatari State further boosts its influence through the media, by broadening the space for debate around subjects that the mainstream Arab media considers taboo. In this way, the country has benefited from the cultural and media decline of the Arab region’s traditional large urban centres: Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo and Damascus. In this context, Qatar is seeking to play a leading role as a regional hub for Arab culture. Furthermore, its involvement as a mediator in several conflicts in the Arab region and elsewhere has positioned it high on the list of countries active in conflict resolution. Finally, the reinforcement of the activities of humanitarian associations and organizations working to alleviate poverty in underdeveloped countries in Asia and Africa has helped consolidate Qatar’s soft power.

It is precisely for these reasons that Qatar, its politics and its international relations are watched with great interest by foreign ministries, research centres and the media at all levels. The role played by the country on the regional and international stage is sometimes criticized and sometimes praised, depending on the angle from which it is viewed. The in-depth academic debate on Qatar’s regional role and foreign policy must transcend all political biases and ideological positions without disregarding them.
completely. A close reading of Doha’s foreign policy reveals political realism. Usually, no matter how rich and developed, small countries do not carry much weight in the political arena, especially in the face of regional and international powers. They thus become entirely subject to the equations set by the powers. This forces them to choose between two orientations. The first imposes a relationship of dependence and submission, in which they are included under the wing of a larger power in exchange for protection against the threats of other powers. The second leads them to build alliances to counter these threats.

1995: The Date of Qatari Foreign Policy Renewal

The great shift in Qatar’s foreign policy began with the coming to power of a new administration in June 1995 and can be examined alongside the change in leadership by tracing the impact on policy. Under Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad (1972-1995), Qatari foreign policy was almost entirely governed by systemic factors, consistent with the structure of the regional system, in which geographical and geopolitical factors are central. This changed in 1995, when the Qatari Head of State attempted to control the structural factors, or at least limit their ability to hinder the achievement of his goals and implementation of his policies, by adopting specific strategies. The new Qatari administration embraced an active foreign policy that protected its political and economic interests and reflected its ambition to play an influential regional role. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa’s approach was geared towards change, towards breaking with the status quo, and making the most of the country’s capabilities and natural resources. Thus, since 1995, Qatar’s foreign policy has clearly reflected its national interests, its leaders’ regional ambitions and its security needs. Prior to that, one could argue that Qatar did not have a foreign policy of its own. As for Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa’s vision of his country’s role and place in regional and international politics, and his ability to devise suitable strategies to overcome structural constraints, the new Qatari leader first had to analyse the surrounding external environment and probe its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and risks. The first structural challenge his analysis revealed was Qatar’s geographical situation in terms of its size and population, squeezed between two major regional powers, both seeking to pull it into their orbit, amidst fierce competition and a turbulent and risky security environment in which Qatar cannot afford to be neutral.

Qatar’s financial independence was the first and most important step towards an independent foreign policy

An ambitious strategy to meet this first challenge could only be achieved with the appropriate means. Accordingly, work began to explore and exploit the strengths and opportunities to transform Qatar from a small state to a regional power (middle power). Although geography has deprived Qatar of traditional sources of power, it has endowed it with abundant energy reserves. With more than 24 trillion cubic metres, or 13% of global reserves,1 it has the world’s third largest natural gas reserves, behind only Russia and Iran. Thanks to costly investments in the liquefied gas industry, today Qatar has a production capacity of 79 million tonnes per year, a figure expected to swell to 126 million tonnes by 2027; it currently dominates 25% of this market worldwide.2 These abundant financial resources, resulting from the major outlay in natural gas extraction and liquefaction to enable its export via oil tankers, have gone hand in hand with the rise of a new political elite with a strategic plan. So began the process of Qatar’s transformation into a regional middle power, entailing a more independent foreign policy and a more active regional role. Qatar’s financial independence was thus the first and most important step towards an independent foreign policy.

Security Challenges

Iraq’s defeat in the war to liberate Kuwait in 1991, and the policy adopted by the Clinton Administration in the US starting in 1993, led to a major shift in the regional balance of power, paving the way for Saudi hegemony. As a result of this shift in power relations, and the ensuing shift from a state of balance to one of hegemony, Qatar’s security dilemma intensified. Qatar began to look for tools to ensure its survival in the face of escalating threats in its regional environment. It signed a defence agreement with the United States in 1992, followed by another with France in 1994. When Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa came to power in 1995, security became a supreme strategy for the country in the face of external threats, as well as a means of preserving its independence, far from the influx of its two large neighbours, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Al Jazeera became a key player not only in the regional context, but on the international scene

Needless to say, Saudi Arabia did not welcome the attempt by Qatar’s new ruling elite to adopt a foreign policy independent of it. This is because that country strives, above all, to align the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council with its policy. Sheikh Hamad thus faced strong opposition to his rule and policy from Riyadh, which considered him to be leading a rebellion. Hence, the Kingdom’s support for two coup attempts to overthrow the government in Doha, in 1996 and 2002. It likewise opposed the construction of gas pipelines to transport Qatari gas to Kuwait and Bahrain.

The Saudi position prompted Sheikh Hamad to adopt a combination of defensive and offensive strategies. These included attempts to create a balance, the building of alliances, and using the available soft-power tools (mediation, conflict resolution, media, cultural activities, research centres, funding for humanitarian work and sport). In other words, Qatar partnered with international powers to become part of the global economic system.

Qatar’s foreign policy orientation was thus clearly driven entirely by its security dilemma. In this regard, although Qatar has sometimes proved able to turn a foreign policy threat into a strength by adopting offensive strategies to seize the opportunities available in its environment, this has also increased the risk ratios, as evidenced by the 2017 crisis.

In general, the strategies that Qatar has pursued in its quest to adopt an independent foreign policy and carve out a regional role commensurate with its leaders’ ambition can be summarized as follows:

Financial Independence

Of all the oil-producing Gulf states, only Qatar has given natural gas the attention it deserves. The other countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, treated it more carelessly, considering it a mere by-product of oil. Often, the gas was either burned off or pumped back into the wells to push the oil out before ultimately being sold at low prices. This situation changed dramatically at the turn of the millennium due to the population boom and strong economic growth, which increased the need to generate electricity and spurred the expansion of gas-dependent industries, such as the petrochemical and aluminium industries. Indeed, most Gulf countries have recently increased their gas imports to reduce oil consumption in power generation in order to make it available for export. Saudi Arabia, for example, consumes about 900,000 barrels of oil per day to generate electricity; by replacing the oil used for electricity production with gas, it can supply this amount for export.

Occupying the Media Field

In light of Saudi Arabia’s near absolute domination of the Arab media space, in November 1996, Qatar launched Al Jazeera, the first Arab satellite channel specialized in news. By meeting the urgent need for a news channel with a wide margin of freedom and a diversity of opinions, Al Jazeera gained great popularity, in particular during its coverage of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the second Palestinian In-

tifada in 2000. An important dimension of Qatari soft power, the channel became a key player not only in the regional context, but on the international scene. As a result, the channel has been very poorly regarded by most Arab regimes, which consider it to have propagated values foreign to the region. Al Jazeera’s activities have sparked several diplomatic crises between Qatar and various Arab countries. The channel was an essential part of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa’s plan to develop Qatar and secure for it an ambitious regional role of its own. Indeed, it has become one of the most effective tools to this end.

**Strengthening the Relationship with Washington**

After achieving financial independence and owning its own influential media, the third prong of Qatar’s independence strategy was to strengthen its security and means of defending itself. The tension with Saudi Arabia in the wake of the 1996 coup attempt in Qatar prompted the country to seek tools and means to bolster its defence and mitigate the threats it faces. One of the solutions was rapprochement with Washington in order to boost the level of US commitment to ensuring Qatar’s security in the face of Saudi, Emirati and Egyptian attempts to overthrow its regime. Qatar seemed to be in urgent need of strong allies to help it deal with its security dilemma, exacerbated by its deteriorating relations with its neighbours. In 1992, Qatar signed a defence agreement with Washington. In so doing, it sought to take advantage of the peace process that gave rise to the Oslo Accords between the Palestinians and Israelis and get closer to Israel. Qatar agreed to open a trade office to represent Israeli interests in 1996. However, this rapprochement was cut short by the first major stumbling blocks encountered in the peace process: the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the coming to power of the Israeli right led by Benjamin Netanyahu, and the suspension of the Palestinian-Israeli and Syrian-Israeli peace talks. Qatar has since abandoned this policy, in favour of a more dynamic foreign policy based on balance. The country began to reinforce its military relations with Washington, even as it moved closer to Washington’s adversaries in the region, rather than its allies. The rule followed is to maintain relations with everyone while striking a balance between them.

A crucial step in this direction was the transfer of US forces from Saudi Arabia to Qatar in 2003. The Doha government, which had made the Al Udeid base available to the US in 2000 without signing any agreement, left the Americans in charge of it from 2001 on. In December 2002, Doha and Washington finally signed an agreement giving official cover to the US military presence at Al Udeid. In April 2003, the US Air Force Central Command moved from Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia to the Al Udeid base. The US’s growing reliance on Qatar, in terms of its military presence in the region, in a theatre of major operations for US forces (due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan), has further strengthened Qatar’s importance for Washington. Qatar’s success in attracting the US military presence was viewed as an important step towards resolving its security dilemma and embracing a bolder, more independent foreign policy.

**Mediation Diplomacy**

This political ability to simultaneously establish relations with opposing countries and political forces has allowed Qatar to play a unique role in a number of regional conflicts. This strategy has imbued its policy with greater strength and influence, although it has been marred by ambiguity for some, and by confusion for others, to the extent of increasing the level of resentment towards it amongst its adversaries, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

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Qatar has thus positioned itself as a key actor in several situations of regional tension: in ending the political crisis that broke out in Lebanon following Hezbollah’s invasion of its capital Beirut on 7 May 2008, or by offering to mediate between the Houthis and former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to find a
solution to their fourth war in 2007. Doha also helped set up a series of meetings between the Taliban and the US and made considerable diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. Qatar’s effective mediation to resolve certain disputes in the Arab and Islamic world has made it an effective mediator and an important regional player. Its mediation efforts have become an integral part of its foreign policy toolbox and are often conducted in the spotlight in front of local and international media. This diplomacy aims to project an image of Qatar as a recognized intermediary and neutral country, strongly committed to peace and stability in the region. The use of this diplomacy optimizes its interests and influence.

Balancing Relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran

Since the early 1990s, Qatar has striven for balance in its relations with its two large neighbours. This, of course, meant breaking with the policy of rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, adopted following its independence in 1971, in order to pursue slightly greater proximity with Iran until the desired balance in these relations could be achieved. To this end, it settled its maritime border disputes with Iran and concluded a security agreement with it in 2010. However, Qatar has been unable to achieve its goal. It has thus resigned itself to having bad relations with one of its neighbours, but endeavouring to avoid having bad relations with both at the same time.

Qatar mediation efforts have become an integral part of its foreign policy toolbox

It could be argued that Qatar did not have a foreign policy of its own until the early 1990s. On the contrary, after the end of the British protectorate in 1971 and the dissipation of the effects of the Treaty of Friendship that had bound it to Great Britain in 1981, it relied entirely on Saudi Arabia within the framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

As noted, due to its delicate geopolitical situation, Qatar has developed a strategy more akin to what could be called the “law of survival” in its foreign policy. When faced with pressure from Iran, it pushes Saudi Arabia closer to the coalition’s borders; when Saudi Arabia is the source of the threat, Qatar counters with a calculated rapprochement with Iran. The exception to this rule occurred during the Arab Spring (2011-2013), when Qatar pursued offensive behaviour in which it took a gamble on the possibility of a change in the structure of the regional system, betting on a democratic transition that both Iran and Saudi Arabia opposed.

Sources


