

Strategic Hedging Helps Qatar Weather the Current Crisis



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Since the middle of the 1990s, the State of Qatar has pursued a policy of strategic hedging, cultivating relations with friends and allies outside the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which it helped establish in 1981. The Qatari leadership has also emphasized a soft power approach to foreign policy. That it has been able to withstand the pressures of diplomatic and geographical isolation from its Arabian Peninsula hinterland is testament to the success of these foreign policy choices.

For Qatar as a small state, strategic hedging was necessitated by three interconnected considerations.

The first was a fear that a dominant Saudi Arabia among GCC members could jeopardize foreign policy independence and constrain policy choices.

The second was the reality of the ever-present disputes between the Saudi Arabian and Emirati leaderships and the former ruler of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, and the current emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.

The third was Qatar's ascendance as a major player in natural gas production and distribution and its influence on regional and international economies.

Indeed, Qatar's hedging on its foreign policy is central to the apparent resilience it has shown since the eruption of the current crisis with other GCC members. In fact, what has so far been surprising is the level of confidence the political leadership in Doha has shown in defending its position, despite developments pointing to potential calamitous conditions caused by its isolation.

This confidence can arguably be credited to an understanding in Doha that if an ally bolts on commitments, there always are others who could provide needed guarantees. This was lamentably obvious in the American case when contradictory stances by President Donald Trump, on the one hand, and the Departments of Defense and State, on the other, deprived Doha of the assurance of American support. That this happened despite Qatar's hosting of America's largest military base in the Middle East and its CENTCOM Forward Command, among other assets, is testament to the rationality of strategic hedging that a small state like Qatar can count on. The Trump Administration's signing an agreement to supply Qatar with the sophisticated F-15 fighters only helps the tiny state weather adverse conditions.

As things stand now, Qatar seems to have avoided the dire consequences of the crisis by reaching out to the many friends it has made over the years. Its foreign minister, Mohammad bin Abdel-Rahman Al Thani, has visited Russia, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom to present the Qatari case and found receptive audiences. What also worked in his favor was a uniform message of emphasizing Qatar's openness and readiness for mediation, all the while reminding audiences of the importance of GCC unity.

Qatar also received arguably unqualified support from Turkey, whose parliament just voted to allow the deployment of Turkish troops to a Turkish base in Qatar, which was established as part of a 2015 agreement on military cooperation between the two countries. In addition, Doha received humanitarian assistance from none other than Iran to stock its grocery shelves after the Bahraini-Saudi-Emirati blockade. Not to be outdone, Oman — another seeker of independent foreign policy making among GCC states — established direct sea-lanes with Qatar for weekly deliveries of foodstuffs and other tradeable goods. So did India. Short of a direct intervention by Doha's adversaries, such forthcoming assistance is likely to continue and to give Qatar the necessary means to wait out the blockade and diplomatic isolation.

Simultaneously, Qatar has asserted that it will continue to pursue means to serve its national interest.

As for relations with Iran, Doha believes that it cannot rely on the bluster and bravado of the Trump administration and thus maintains a moderate stand toward the Islamic

Republic. In this, it may know that it is gambling and thus must be prepared to deal with Iran's overreach.

But on the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar's leaders believe that the organization is not an incubator for terrorism; rather, they see it as a moderate outfit that represents a sizeable portion of the Arab public. Hamas also is seen as a movement for Palestinian national liberation that has finally endorsed the declared parameters of the Arab League's 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. Doha thus considers the attacks on it and the organization to be disingenuous, aiming to harm its reputation and that of the Palestinian resistance.

Qatar also defends itself against charges of funding and supporting terrorism. While it hosts Hamas leaders, it does not support the organization's military activities. Instead, it funds development projects in Gaza, where Hamas rules. Like other GCC states, it has declared the Lebanese Hezbollah a terrorist organization and participates in GCC sanctions against the militia. It also rightly defends itself for hosting the Afghan Taliban on behalf of the United States which in the past has used Doha as a potential venue for negotiating with the movement.

Just as welcome have been the calm and caution with which Qatar's leadership has responded to the aggressive measures by its adversaries and the anti-Qatar war of words unleashed by scores of politicians and commentators monopolizing Gulf airwaves. Indeed, the small emirate refrained from taking measures against residents from other Gulf states in retaliation for the treatment of its citizens by Bahraini, Saudi, and Emirati authorities. It also did not ban these countries' satellite channels, as happened with its Al Jazeera network, and put no restrictions on its adversaries' airliners. Nor did it suspend gas supplies to the UAE in retaliation for the economic blockade imposed on it by its neighbors.

Finally, the corollary is just as true: Qatar's adversaries among the GCC states did not accurately appreciate Doha's ability to rely on the support it had cultivated over the years. Thus, they failed to effect the change they desired in its behavior. While they were able to partially isolate the tiny state, their political goals have so far been stymied. As the crisis drags on and the stalemate continues, they find themselves bereft of more effective means to pressure the Qatari leadership and may soon be forced to retreat from the maximalist demands with which they began.

Qatar's case is a clear example of the use of strategic hedging and soft power to blunt the impact of outside pressure on the foreign policy of small states. Its ability to exploit its financial clout to serve such a policy is arguably the weapon that has helped it succeed—at least so far—in avoiding the dire consequences of the crisis, although at a dear cost to its relations with other GCC states.

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