
ACTORNESS OF SMALL POWER: THE CASE OF QATAR

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Historically, in the system of international relations, small states have been the object of power, not its source. However, at present there is an increasing involvement of small states in international processes and a continuing re-definition of their role in the international system. The foreign policy of Qatar is a perfect case to study these processes and to test the new theories. The article is devoted to the consideration of the tools of Qatar's foreign policy influence, which it successfully uses to protect and promote its own interests. Considering that this state is limited in terms of strategically important factors, such as area, population, diversity of natural resources, it has managed to gain significant importance in international affairs in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East.

This is due to a successful combination of the following factors: wealth, the image of a stable, progressive, and investment-friendly country and active diplomacy, which together make up its power potential.

Keywords: *the Middle East, Qatar, foreign policy, small state.*

Traditionally, dominant theories of international relations have asserted the indisputable dominance of major powers in the international arena, which possess a combination of different instruments of influence in world politics. As a rule, the components of state power are the size of territory, population and military potential. However, modern international relations demonstrate other trends, where small states are becoming more and more independent in implementing their own strategies on the world stage.

This study aims to answer the question of how Qatar, despite its relatively limited resources, has managed to carve out a place for itself in world politics.

We start with a brief literature review that traces how small states have been studied in international relations. We will also highlight the trends in the research that have made small states real actors in the international system. This allows us to differentiate our approach and provide a methodological basis for the study of Qatari foreign policy.

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Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The position of small states in the study of international relations is rather controversial. On the one hand, states have traditionally been at the forefront of academic research in this field. The dominance of political realism supported this view throughout most of the twentieth century. States were seen to be motivated by the absolute goal of maximizing their security and ensuring their survival in the anarchic system of international relations (Gilpin 1984: 292). However, the realist tradition also relied on a unidimensional view on power as being solely constituted by military force and related to security issues. In the words of one of the founding fathers of the political realist tradition, Hans Morgenthau (1948: 14), 'armed strength as a threat or a potentiality is the most important material factor making for the political power of a nation.' Modern proponents of the realist theory, such as John Mearsheimer (2014: 55), also argue that power is mainly based on material capabilities, which include military potential. In this view, small states were left in the ambiguous position of being actors in name but not in practice due to the lack of sufficient material resources or military potential. Even conceptually, small states were regarded as a residual category, defined as 'states that are not middle or great powers' (Ingebritsen *et al.* 2005: 7). Robert Keohane (1969: 296) gave a rather pessimistic definition to a small state: 'a state whose leaders consider that, acting alone or in a small group, it can never make a significant impact on the system.' Indeed, the confrontation between the superpowers during the Cold War left small states no room for independent foreign policy.

New trends in international relations and related academic advances provided a theoretical and methodological basis for the emergence of a new perspective.

The first trend was the growing interest in transnational actors in world politics. Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane (Keohane and Nye 1971: 332) proposed that such actors play a major role in transnational communication, finance, trade, and travel. This view differed radically from the state-centric approach, which assumed that transnational actors are simply agents of states' influence. By acknowledging the actorness of transnational powers, this view also raised the importance of cooperation and communication in the international system. It was stated that actorness is not based solely on material capabilities or military power. This opened up the possibility for reassessing the role of small states in international relations on a more solid basis.

The trend towards revising the concept of power in international relations continued. Another important work by Keohane and Nye (2011: 25), originally published in 1977, argued that the importance of military power is diminishing due to the rise of global interdependence, which gives rise to other forms of power. Keohane and Nye (*Ibid.*: 102) also emphasized the fact that small states are more successful in using international organization as a platform for discussion, and they take advantage of political bargaining. Thus, once again, small states were acknowledged to have alternative sources of power.

The concept of interdependence was critical in changing the understanding of the hidden strengths of middle and small powers. Great powers are admitted to be more vulnerable to external shocks due to their involvement in international affairs (Safranchuk and Lukyanov 2021a: 60). Their loss could be seen as a chance for smaller states to act on their own. We can elaborate this idea by referring to the famous thesis of Robert Keohane (Keohane 2005: 320), who stated that international cooperation can be pos-

sible even without a hegemon enforcing the norms. International regimes are said to play a key role in this process by minimizing interaction costs (Keohane and Nye 2011: 25). In fact, small and middle powers have used these elements of the international system quite successfully (Sucu *et al.* 2021). The study by Richard Higgott and Andrew Cooper (Higgott and Cooper 1990: 625) showed that a coalition of small and middle powers, called the Cairns Group, managed to propose a 'third way' in the Uruguay Round negotiations. A research paper by Bernard Wood (1987: 31) also noted that the ability to act in concert allowed non-great powers to gain prominence in the international system.

At the same time, the concept of small states continued to attract scholarly attention. Annette Fox (Fox 1969: 764) reviewed the development of the role of small states throughout the first half of the twentieth century and noted that 'the capacity of small states to speak up in the international system has grown remarkably since 1919.' However, the study of such actors was still nascent in the early 1970s as Peter Baehr noted (Baehr 1975: 466), and the whole category of 'small states' was too broad and quite irrelevant for the analysis. Despite the ambiguity surrounding the notion of small states, researchers still tried to find explanations for their behavior. Maurice East (1973: 576) applied a formal model to the behavior of small states and revealed that such actors tend to act jointly and may choose to engage in high-risk actions. William Paterson's review article highlighted important factors such as geography or internal coherence that allow small states to overcome their weaknesses (Paterson 1969: 121–122).

The end of the Cold War era and the liberalization of the world order gave small and middle powers an opportunity to act on their own and to make use of their innate advantages.

Notably, the end of the security confrontation also encouraged the process of redefining power in academic circles. In 1990, Joseph Nye (Nye 1990: 167) introduced the concept of 'soft power' which was based on cooptation through culture, ideology and institutions. This model was contrasted with the coercive nature of hard power. Later Nye (Nye 2009) introduced a more elaborated concept: 'smart power'. Smart power was presented as a combination of coercion, payment and attraction that allowed for the use of all aspects of state capabilities (*Ibid.*: 160).

An influential article by Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 120) proposes a taxonomy of power. The authors distinguish compulsory, institutional, structural and productive power (*Ibid.*). Some scholars have developed taxonomies specifically for the purposes of analyzing the agency of small states. Tom Long (Long 2017) is the author of one such framework. Long (*Ibid.*: 187) distinguishes particular-intrinsic power, which refers to specific material resources that become useful when given means and applied to a specific goal; derivative power, which consists in making larger states to do the bidding of smaller ones; and finally collective power, which allows small states to block themselves with similar non-great powers.

To conclude the review of the development of studies on small states, let us look at the current state of the international system. The modern system of international relations is non-hegemonic and allows for active competition in both ideational and material spheres. Small states flourish in such an environment, which allows them to act freely and choose the policy instruments they prefer (Safranchuk, Zhornist and Nesmahnyy 2021: 178). In the future, small states may become even more prominent by flocking

together into large regional associations based on shared civilizational ties, further enhancing mutual prosperity and stability (Safranchuk and Lukyanov 2021b). Another important trend is the increasing ambitions of small states which may aspire to become middle powers and even try to dominate the region. The rise of ambitious actors in international relations is best exemplified by Turkey, which aspires to gain the great power status and dominance in the region (Sucu *et al.* 2021: 319).

In our view, the analysis of Qatar's foreign policy requires a multidimensional approach to power and a focus on the new realities of the international politics. Qatar quite successfully combines media, economic and diplomatic instruments, while at the same time ensuring its security by establishing links with major powers. Several researchers have drawn attention to the versatility of Qatar's foreign policy strategy. Lina Khatib (2013: 439) revealed that Qatar's preferred policy tool is mediation, which is used to achieve the status of 'everybody's friend'. Miller and Verhoeven (2020: 6, 9) also highlighted that the Qatari approach to 'overcoming smallness' is indeed multifaceted, involving constant balancing and other tools such as Al-Jazeera to harness its soft power. Mehran Kamrava (2017) argues that Qatar possesses 'subtle power' that combines 'hedging, military security and protection, branding and hyperactive diplomacy, and international investments.'

Qatari policy includes many aspects that go beyond simple labels of soft or hard power. We do not rely on any specific framework to guide our analysis of Qatari foreign policy. This would limit our analysis because Qatar's approach to foreign policy does not fit ideally into any of the power models mentioned. In fact, Qatar manages to combine a variety of instruments and resources to build up a truly multidimensional power.

Qatar's Power: The Background

Qatar is an illustrative example of a state that is small in size and population, but not in status or capabilities. The country occupies a relatively small area of 11,610 km² (166th in the world) and has a small population of 2.8 million people (139th in 2020) (World Population Review 2020). However, its key geostrategic position, the availability of energy resources and a wise foreign policy strategy allow Qatar to overcome these limitations and maintain the role of one of the leading players in the Persian Gulf.

Since gaining independence, Qatar's top leadership has gradually sought to develop its military, political, economic, financial and diplomatic potential, which has allowed the government to pursue a policy independent of other Gulf states. The discourse chosen by the Qatari government at that time could not be described as a 'soft' or 'hard' power, but rather as a smart combination of several foreign policy tools that a small state can have at its disposal.

If we consider Qatar's foreign policy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it seemed too ambitious at the time. For such a small state, located in one of the most unstable regions of the world, this approach did not correspond to the country's size and provoked the indignation of larger powers. However, the analysis of Qatar's foreign policy discourse demonstrates that the chosen model has led to the successful positioning of the country as a bulwark of stability in an unstable region on the international arena and the creation of favorable conditions for the promotion of the country's international agenda.

At this point, we can certainly grasp the structure of Qatar's multidimensional power. In our view, this structure is formed by a unique economic model, a multilateral diplomatic strategy and a significant soft power based on media resources.

In the following sections, we will examine each of the above-mentioned components that make up Qatar's power.

Qatar Economic Model

The backbone of Qatar's active foreign policy is its unique economic model. The stability of the country and its costly international activities are based on significant reserves of natural resources, which are deliberately used by the government to benefit Qatar.

Qatar ranks third in the world in terms of natural gas reserves (BP 2020). The availability of this energy resource, combined with a high-tech approach and a diversified energy supply system, makes the emirate the second largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG) in the world (22 per cent of the global LNG market in 2020) and an influential actor in the global energy market. Qatar exports LNG to the UK, India, and Japan, and is also engaged in expanding sales markets in Europe, Southeast Asia, South America, Africa and the Arab region (Statista 2020).

However, the share of hydrocarbons accounts for 81 per cent of the country's exports (Trend Economy 2020) and 50 per cent of GDP, which makes the economy highly dependent on market conditions, so the government is committed to diversifying the economy, which was announced in 2008 as part of the Qatar National Vision 2030 plan.

Qatar's internal riches have made it a major investor in foreign economies. Investments are made through the Qatar Investment Authority's (QIA) National Welfare Fund (Middle East Monitor 2020). It was established in 2005 with the aim of redistributing oil and gas revenues and diversifying the economy into new sectors. In 2020, the agency managed assets worth \$295 billion and became the sixth largest national welfare fund. According to official information, QIA invests directly and through subsidiaries in Barclays Bank, Volkswagen Group, Porsche, Harrods Group, Sainsbury's, Credit Suisse, Canary Wharf Group, Royal Dutch Shell, Spanish football club Barça, among others, and owns 20 per cent of the London Stock Exchange Group (Feiler and Zeev 2017: 12).

Overall, Qatar's economy has demonstrated considerable resilience. It is a country with one of the highest levels of GDP per capita, which reached \$ 96.6 thousand in 2020. Qatari citizens, who make up 13 per cent (or 320,000 people) of the total population, enjoy material benefits (free education and healthcare, subsidized housing and other benefits) in exchange for political loyalty (IMF 2021). In this respect, the country has the resource of stability to pursue an independent policy.

However, the country's economic power is not an exclusive factor in Qatar's participation in global politics.

Qatar's Diplomatic Strategy: Hedging and Balancing

Qatar's foreign policy discourse is characterized by flexibility and a rejection of rigid adherence to any alliance in the Middle East. It is a carefully planned policy that focuses on military cooperation with the United States, while maintaining ties with other regional actors.

Qatar's limited military potential due to its small population means that it cannot guarantee its security against its larger neighbors on its own. To overcome this weakness, Qatar has deliberately allowed the large Al-Udeid military base and the headquarters of the US Central Command of the Armed Forces, as well as the relatively new

Republic of Turkey military base, to be located on its territory. In this respect, Qatar's power stems in part from its ability to choose right alliances that allow this small state to obtain security guarantees without having to build up its own military. At the same time, by diversifying its contacts, Qatar has managed to avoid becoming dependent on a stronger partner.

As of 2020, Qatar ranks eighth largest arms importer in the world (3.8 per cent of global imports) and fourth largest in the Middle East region after Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Algeria. The USA (47 per cent), France (38 per cent), and the United Kingdom (7.5 per cent) remain Qatar's traditional arms supply partners, but military-technical cooperation is also developing with Germany, Italy, Turkey and China (SIPRI 2020).

Unlike other Gulf states, Doha has taken the path of establishing political and economic contacts with Iran, which contradicts the interests of the United States, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the region. In general, relations with Iran are pragmatic, since Qatar and Iran jointly operate the largest gas field, North Field/South Pars, and at the same time this helps to hinder Saudi Arabia's attempts to dominate the region. This approach allows to minimize risks and to balance between the interests of the warring parties in order to ensure their own stability and security. Qatar's system of international contacts extends throughout the Middle East and beyond.

Since 2000, Qatar has become the main mediator in the settlement of national and international conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. This line of activity contradicts the realist theory, according to which small states should demonstrate a low level of participation in international affairs and avoid involvement in conflicts. However, the example of Qatar proves the opposite – the government has begun to use the tools of public diplomacy in its activities, which is defined as ‘a set of measures to inform the foreign public in order to create a public discussion around a problematic issue’ (Leiden University 2017). On this basis, Qatar has mediated in a number of conflicts, including Lebanon (2008), Yemen (2008–2010), Darfur (2008–2010), Sudan-Chad (2009), Djibouti-Eritrea (2010) and Palestine (2012). Qatar has proven itself to be an exceptionally honest mediator in these conflicts, seeking to resolve and settle all these issues. Probably, this type of mediation is also part of Doha's strategy to expand cooperation with both friendly countries and opponents.

A particularly interesting case of Qatar's balancing strategy is its partnership with Turkey. Turkey was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with Qatar, which was followed by the signing of several agreements that further strengthened their partnership (Vasiliev, Khairullin and Korotayev 2019). The relationship appears to be a beneficial symbiosis: Qatar's financial and media resources are combined with Turkey's military power and demographic potential (Vasiliev, Issaev *et al.* 2019). The Qatari-Turkish partnership could also be seen as a balancing act against Saudi Arabia, which strives for regional dominance in the Middle East. The Qatari-Turkish cooperation and its balancing potential became particularly evident during the Arab Spring and the events that followed. The Qatari-Turkish coalition used its connections to a transnational network of Muslim organizations to gain influence amid the turbulence in countries such as Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia (Vasiliev, Issaev *et al.* 2019). For example, Qatar and Turkey have gained a strong foothold in Syria (*Ibid.*). In Tunisia, they were able to establish their influence through their relationship with the Ennahda Movement, a major political party (*Ibid.*). In Egypt, Qatar and Turkey supported the Muslim Brotherhood's

rise to power (Korotayev, Issaev and Mardasov 2019). Saudi Arabia, as one of the main contenders for the regional dominance, had to ally itself with liberals and even communists to counter the spread of Qatari-Turkish influence (Korotayev and Issaev 2014). The resilience of the Qatari-Turkish partnership was also directly tested during a blockade initiated by several Arab countries against Qatar. In the midst of these events, Turkey showed its determination to stand by Qatar by condemning the blockade and sending aid to its partner (Başkan and Pala 2020).

A small territory and population play an important role in ensuring the stability of the country, making it more cohesive. Larger countries in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt) spend much effort to preserve their territorial integrity, prevent conflicts between groups of the population (especially confessional tensions) and maintain their socio-economic well-being. These characteristics allow Qatar to be adaptive and make quick foreign policy decisions.

Soft Power and Qatar's Image

An equally important instrument of Qatar's influence is the international broadcaster Al Jazeera, which is considered an instrument of both soft power and the promotion of the state's interests on the world stage. This aspect is especially relevant in the context of the leading role of information technologies, which have made international politics more transparent, less closed at national borders, but also more complex and unpredictable. Founded in 1996, it was the first Arab news channel to broadcast news around the clock.

The creation of Al Jazeera has given Qatar a new form of power, that is, the ability to respond to and disseminate information in a timely manner. Today, the channel is one of the leading organizations involved in shaping public opinion in the Middle East, as an alternative to state-owned Arab channels and the dominant Western media. The channel's position lies in the objectivity of the information it broadcasts, which reflects different points of view, including criticism of regional actors. The channel adheres to the principle of objectivity of broadcast information presenting different points of view on important issues.

Thus, the channel has become a very important tool for spreading the Qatari point of view on various issues, causing outrage in the countries of the Middle East. In particular, during the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera provided extensive coverage of Arab protests, which led to an escalation of tensions in Qatar's relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Qatar has a positive reputation in the world. Its media power has been one of the key drivers in shaping the image of the State of Qatar. For example, the government is making several targeted efforts to strengthen Qatar's branding by promoting the image of a prosperous state, sponsoring large-scale cultural events (most notable the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar), creating a national airline Qatar Airways, that leads the world rankings in terms of service, and hosting international conferences that attract world opinion leaders.

Conclusion

Qatar is a perfect example of a small state that succeeded in diversifying its sources of power and act as an independent actor in international relations.

In the case of Qatar, a carefully calibrated hedging policy, the promotion of Qatar's image, significant state potential and the reasonable use of the country's comparative advantages have combined to create the right conditions for strengthening the state's position. Although Qatar is a small power that has been able to overcome the limitations of its size and material capabilities, it is still interested in regional partners to boost its reach. The Qatari-Turkish cooperation is a perfect example of such a symbiosis that has allowed Qatar to extend its reach beyond its territory.

The case of Qatar is an interesting illustration of how small states can ensure their actorness. Such states struggle to 'overcome their smallness' and gain influence in regional and international processes. Their success is mostly based on subtle capabilities that can be analyzed by considering power as being a multifaceted phenomenon. This may well include a diplomatic strategy combined with a unique economic position or cultural attractiveness.

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