

Issue

Brief

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Qatar's Stakes in an Evolving West Asia

Kabir Taneja

Abstract

In November 2022, Qatar will become the first state in West Asia and the Arab world to host the coveted FIFA football World Cup. Doha's winning the hosting rights has brought the country—home to only 2.9 million people, more than eight out of every ten of whom are foreign workers—out of the shadow of its large, and more powerful regional neighbours such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This brief views this as an indication that Doha is rising in its position in West Asian geopolitics. It explores Qatar's current engagements with the region and beyond.

Qatar is small by various geographic, demographic, and societal measures. It is just around 160 km from north to south in land area and its overall population is only 2.9 million people, of whom 88 percent or 2.1 million are migrants who come to the country for work. In 2015 that proportion was a lower 75.5 percent.^{1,2} Indians constitute the largest bloc of these migrant workers, with over 700,000 or 21.8 percent of the total.³

As Qatar prepares to host the FIFA football World Cup in November, it is important to understand the country's geopolitical positioning in today's fast evolving West Asia. At the primal level, hosting such events of global consequence is a reflection of a country's economic and political clout. In 2008, for example, when Beijing hosted the Summer Olympics—admittedly far larger than the football World Cup—the rest of the world came to know that China has become more powerful in the global stage.

Doha's own rise in West Asian geopolitics is often viewed against the backdrop of the economic blockade imposed on it by its fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, led by Saudi Arabia, between 2017 and 2021. While the blockade was indeed consequential for Qatar, the country managed to record exponential economic growth owing to its massive natural gas reserves. It is, after all, the world's fifth largest producer of this commodity that is critical to global energy security, more so today in light of the West's sanctions on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. (Russia is the world's third largest oil producer, after the US and Saudi Arabia.⁴)

As Qatar's economy grows, its foreign policy is evolving, too. This brief therefore investigates Qatar's foreign policy from the perspectives of both its West Asian neighbours, and of countries beyond. It finds three crucial events in the recent past that have influenced the international community's view of Qatar: the Arab Spring protests that challenged long-standing political structures in the region; the diplomatic crisis within the GCC; and Qatar's role in Afghanistan as mediator between the US and the Taliban.⁵

Qatar's Foreign Policy: A Primer

Qatar's geography, as a peninsula jutting out of Saudi Arabia's coastline into the Persian Gulf, puts the state in a unique position. For a large part of the 1980s, Doha sought a balance in its postures in regional conflicts. It was not until the mid-1990s when two events changed thinking among the country's leaders on what the state should aim to build for its future.

In June 1995, then Qatari Crown Prince, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani staged a bloodless coup and seized power from his father, Khalifa Bin Hamad Al Thani. A year later, another coup was attempted, but pre-empted. This was also the time when Qatar's position as a major supplier of natural gas to an energy-deficient world brought it massive earnings. Since then, the Al Thani family has remained the country's reigning monarchs, maintaining steady control over the state. In 2013, Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani handed over power to his son Sheikh Tamim ibn Hamad Al Thani, himself taking on the ceremonial patriarch role of Father Emir.⁶ At around the same time, the kingdom's newfound wealth from its hydrocarbons reserves fuelled its economic growth—a model earlier employed by Saudi Arabia.

Qatar has sustained its development since the 1990s employing a strategy that borrows from the 'neoclassical realism' and 'pragmaticism' schools of thought.⁷ Meanwhile, its foreign policy has been the subject of much debate: What does Doha seek to achieve, especially in the region?

Scholar Marwan Kabalan, studying Qatari foreign policy from the lens of how small states behave, views Doha's vision as being "strategic but offensive". Phrased differently, Qatar assumes an aggressive posture to hedge its risks and survive amidst larger powers.⁸ Qatar's regional neighbours such as Bahrain, of comparable geographic size but with less economic strength, find solace in working under the larger security umbrella of Saudi Arabia and the UAE instead.

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It was in the 2000s when Qatar began playing out its contrarian regional foreign policy postures—a strategy that would perhaps better fit some of today's diplomatic lexicon with constructs such as 'strategic autonomy' and conceptual 'multipolarity' attaching themselves well with how the country chooses to operate its foreign policy.⁹ To achieve this, Qatar also brought itself closer to the US, and the West in general—again, mostly to hedge threats it perceives from Saudi Arabia and Iran while also signalling the arrival of players such as China, India, and Russia on the world stage.

Iran, the seat of power for Shia Islam, is of course on paper a fundamentally ideological threat for Doha. Yet, a military clash on a disputed border region between Qatar and Saudi Arabia in October 1992—with both states having very different versions of what led to the event—is often seen as a watershed moment: Riyadh's displeasure of Qatar not towing the line led to a slow disintegration of a 1982 military agreement between the two, resulting in Qatar falling under the Saudi security umbrella from both economic and military aspects.^{10,11} Furthermore, tussles over prominence of oil and gas industries traditionally led by the Saudis, and now challenged by Qatar's own rise in the sector, added to friction between the neighbours.

“Qatar's foreign policy has been the subject of much debate: What does Doha seek to achieve, especially in the region?”

Qatar and the Arab Spring

Despite the complicated web of its partnerships and alliances, which today includes a more overt opening with Israel, Qatar's foreign policy over the years has delivered on most fronts.¹² In 2002, the US set up a large military presence at the Al Udeid air base just south of Doha, offering Washington D.C. access to launch military operations a year later into Iraq when other US partners such as Saudi Arabia balked from providing similar facilities due to domestic pressures against increased American military presence.¹³ Some years later, in 2011, Qatar contributed to the military intervention in Libya to unseat dictator Muammar Gaddafi and sent its fighter jets to help install a no-fly zone over the country along with other Western powers, gaining agency both in Washington and European capitals.¹⁴

Qatar's homegrown international broadcaster, Al Jazeera, backed by huge media infrastructures and budgets, has also played a critical role in pushing the state's agenda in the region and beyond.¹⁵ The continuing US military presence will perhaps prove to be the biggest insurance policy for Qatar in the coming years, having insulated it in the past from crucial events such as the Arab Spring or the subsequent Qatar-GCC diplomatic crisis.

The people-led protests that began in Tunisia in 2011 and spread like wildfire across countries in West Asia and North Africa, most notably Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Yemen, caused these regions their biggest existential crisis in contemporary history. Known as the 'Arab Spring', the protests targeting autocratic regimes in those countries garnered global support: from the Tahrir Square protests in Egypt that unseated Hosni Mubarak's 29-year-long rule, to the Syrian civil war which remains a point of contention even today. The latter resulted in political vacuums which gave space to, and incubated possibly the most extreme Islamist jihadist group in recent global history—the so-called Islamic State (ISIS, or *Daesh* in Arabic).¹⁶

One of Qatar's most useful tools during those days was Al Jazeera, especially its Arabic edition which was popular amongst the Arab youth. Al Jazeera popularised Qatar's stance during the spring on the needed reforms in the region. While Al Jazeera's English output maintained a more balanced perspective, the Arabic edition became a challenge to the other neighbouring monarchies. Even as Al Jazeera played a catalyst for the spring during this

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period, it aligned strongly with Qatari foreign policy when needed, even if said alignment was seemingly hypocritical in nature. When Saudi Arabia sent troops to Bahrain to quell protests in the 2011 spring and Qatar supported the move, Al Jazeera did not air support for opposition protesters, specifically the Shiite community of the country.^{17,18}

Qatar's response to the wave of protests in the region, being an absolute monarchy, was simultaneously interesting and perplexing. Like its multifaceted approach to foreign policy, Doha did not see the need for an approach that necessarily aligned with those of other Arab states. Qatar supported what these protests were demanding in certain quarters, and as scholar Cristian Coates Ulrichsen had observed, embraced calls for a direction of change.¹⁹ This policy was subsumed by Qatar's ideological bend—i.e., supporting Islamist-backed causes and groups across the region as an extension of its theological leanings.

Qatar is seen as Salafist in ideology, following the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence, much like Saudi Arabia.²⁰ However, within the covenants of realpolitik, as history has shown many times, the relationship between ideology and theology, while strong and often forming the nucleus, is not cast in stone in matters of foreign policy and statecraft.²¹ This is seen in Qatar's support and affinity for Muslim Brotherhood (MB) movements across the region, and its backing of Hamas and other Islamist ecosystems in theatres such as Syria.^a

In Egypt, after the Mubarak regime lost power, the first democratic elections brought in a Brotherhood-supported government in 2012 with Mohamed Morsi as the leader. Under Mubarak, MB was a banned organisation in the country. Morsi's ascent into power was supported by the likes of Qatar and Turkey, both backing Islamist ecosystems, and challenged by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Morsi's government would fall via a coup just over a year later, and replaced by military leader General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Since then, Sisi has had good ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, hailing both for "unconditionally" supporting Egypt.²²

a Shiite Iran's harbouring of members of the Al-Qaeda, a Sunni jihadist group, is another example of such a pragmatic approach.

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Qatar blames Saudi Arabia and the UAE, along with Bahrain and Egypt, for planning the attempted 1996 coup in the country. The subsequent rise of Doha politically and economically, and the resultant unease of others with such progress, ultimately can be attributed to the tendency of big states to desire influence over smaller states. Qatar has challenged this 'rule', and has managed to cause an internal challenge to an already fractious geopolitical situation in the region. In return—for causing a disturbance to status quos within the Arab world—Doha faced an economic and political blockade that lasted for half a decade, even as the leadership continues to believe to this day that the underlying causes which led to the Arab Spring remain unresolved.²³

“Qatar has a history of nurturing complicated partnerships and alliances, which today include a more overt opening with Israel.”

Unravelling the Gulf Blockade on Doha

In 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt announced that they would be severing diplomatic ties with Qatar and banning air and sea access for the country's aircraft and ships. It was meant as an economic blockade to pressure Doha to mend its ways. A few other countries rallied by Saudi Arabia would later join the blockade, including Jordan, Maldives, and Djibouti. Saudi and these other countries accused Qatar of funding terror groups in the region, specifically in places such as Syria, including those that are either directly or indirectly involved with the likes of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

In response, Qatar, which relies heavily on imports, used its foreign policy designs to respond, including leveraging the US presence and interests on its territory. Doha also restored relations with Iran, after it had recalled its ambassador from Tehran in protest, ironically following attacks on the Saudi diplomatic mission in Iran in the aftermath of Riyadh's decision to execute a prominent Shia cleric in 2016.²⁴ Turkey also strengthened its own presence to back Doha against the blockade, including increasing troop numbers at the Al Udeid airbase where it began its military presence as part of a bilateral agreement in 2015.²⁵

Saudi Arabia and its allies issued 13 immediate demands from Doha to reverse the crisis and sought action within a 10-day period. The demands included that the state immediately sever all ties with terror organisations highlighted by the Saudi-led bloc, and, amongst others, shut down the Al Jazeera network, close Turkey's army presence, and scale down ties with Iran.²⁶ The US, under then President Donald Trump, took on a reactionary—and largely ambiguous—policy towards the crisis; the president had no interest in playing a mediator's role. While Trump backed the Saudi-led coalition's call on allegations against Qatar for funding terrorism, his administration did not overtly pressure Doha. It wanted to protect its own interests: Qatar was an anchor of US air power presence in the region, and at that time, Doha mediated critical negotiations between the US and the Taliban to bring a two-decade-long war in Afghanistan to a conclusion.²⁷

In 2018, a year into the blockade, Qatar hosted the Doha Forum, an annual conference since 2003 to debate global affairs attended by top politicians and newsmakers. The event was a success, with strong participation from the US

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and other leaders from across the world—an indication that the international community would rather keep their distance from the Gulf diplomatic crisis, which they saw as a purely regional and intra-Arab affair. Despite dramatic threats of blockades, Doha managed to weather the crisis. This brief argues that it was because of Doha’s audacity in maintaining a foreign and strategic policy that might be called “ambitious” for a rich, small state in a conflict-prone region.

The same audacity would come into play in 2020 and 2021, as Qatar successfully concluded its mediation between the US and the Taliban, ending with the signing of a deal between the two in February 2020.²⁸ This not only brought international clout for Qatar, but also significantly increased its influence and agency in Washington D.C., perhaps to similar levels previously only enjoyed by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi from the Arab world. The Gulf crisis ended in 2021, although many of the issues that led to it remain largely unresolved.²⁹

Yet, the Qatari emir has said in a rare interview in September 2022 that he did “not want to talk about the past.” He said the GCC was “in the process of healing after great shock and turmoil, but we are now on the right track.”³⁰

“In response to the Saudi-led blockade, Qatar leveraged US presence and interests on its territory.”

Qatar's Mediation Strategies and Afghanistan

Last year, the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan after an almost overnight collapse of erstwhile president Ashraf Ghani's government in Kabul. The events leading to the fall of Kabul began in Doha, and Qatar's decision and willingness to mediate between Washington and the Taliban as early as in 2011. In June 2013, the Taliban inaugurated an office in the outskirts of the Qatari capital, and immediately drew controversy by raising the Islamic Emirate (Taliban) flag over the compound.³¹ Most of the Taliban mediators came from Pakistan, were well-read, and lived a comfortable life in Doha.³²

That would not be the first time for Qatar to mediate a conflict. In Doha's more prominent efforts since the mid-2000s, it has used both its diplomatic acumen and financial muscle to coax both sides to at least come to the negotiating table, if nothing else. Some of Doha's most notable efforts have been in Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, Palestine, Djibouti, and Eritrea. Analysts have long pondered the motivations behind Doha's expansive mediation efforts in West Asia and Africa. For scholar Mehran Kamrava, "(the) motivation for Qatari mediation efforts is a combination of small state survival strategies and desire for international prestige."³³

In the case of the Taliban and the US, Doha's mediation was largely about prestige, and as mentioned earlier, meant to strengthen its relations with the West. These were the same motivations for its stance on the Libyan crisis. Kamrava's theory of small state survival comes into play: the UAE was in fact upset with its ambassador to the US that it was Doha that managed to host the Taliban's political office and not Abu Dhabi—this also highlights the regional tussles that have at times cornered Qatar into diplomatic crises with its peers at the GCC.³⁴

Prior instances of Qatar's mediation and entry into other Gulf states' sphere of influence have also caused friction. For example, Egypt in the mid-2000s attempted to mediate the Darfur crisis in Sudan, both bilaterally and through regional frameworks such as the Arab League and the African Union; ultimately it could not match the money power of Qatar, despite Egypt being Sudan's largest economic partner.³⁵ For Cairo, which sees itself as a significant player in regional geopolitics, Qatar taking the mantle in this space would have been

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almost derogatory; it was another victory for Doha's desire for global prestige. Since the Qatar blockade began in 2017, it was only in September 2022 that a sitting Egyptian president visited Qatar to normalise ties. Indeed, the thawing was due to economic considerations: Egypt was facing a brittle economic situation and Qatar had deep coffers available for investments.³⁶

Qatar's mediation in Afghanistan raises similar concerns for Doha, not only from a strategic geopolitical point of view but also from a perception point of view as Doha was seen becoming palatable to one more extremist group, the Taliban. Ultimately, from a distance, Doha as a city and political power was becoming synonymous with being host to or being approachable by groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Taliban.^{37,38} The other risk that Qatar took upon itself was that in case of a complete failure of the February 2020 deal between the US and the Taliban, one that today tethers on the edge as the Taliban consolidate power and struggle to deliver on issues such as girls' education, human rights and even security guarantees, it is Doha that may bear the brunt of such a failure. After August 2021, Qatar also took on the responsibility of officially representing American interests in a Taliban-controlled Kabul.³⁹ Recent reports of a potential 'security pact' between the Taliban and Qatar significantly increases Qatar's risk and responsibility of putting out political fires in Afghanistan in the future.⁴⁰

Afghanistan was also a ground for Qatar-UAE tussle for influence, in the same way as a deal to operate the country's critical airports became a geopolitical tussle between the UAE and a joint bid by Qatar and Turkey, a spillover of regional geopolitical dynamics into a fragile situation in Kabul. While Qatar mediated with the Taliban, internal factionalism within the group allows Abu Dhabi to approach other power brokers to lobby for its interests, specifically with the UAE being host to many former Afghan leaders from all ethnic and political backgrounds, while Doha's Taliban representation was still limited in its scope.⁴¹ Ultimately, the tussle over the airport contract was won by the UAE, undermining Qatari interests that are largely political in nature and, as mentioned earlier, about prestige, and in a country where it played a critical role for years.⁴²

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This design of mediation as part of foreign policy to elevate the kingdom's profile may be precarious. However, it has resulted in greater engagements, specifically in the South Asia region, beyond energy and migrant workers which are both usually seen as transactional issues. In the run-up to August 2021 and the US withdrawal, India appointed a new ambassador to Qatar, and one who held more weight in the country's diplomatic hierarchies when it came to Afghanistan and its neighbourhood. In August 2020 when Ambassador Deepak Mittal took charge—after already having had considerable experience in the Ministry of External Affairs as Joint Secretary for Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran (PAI)—⁴³ the posting eventually led to India's first public meeting with a Taliban official when Mittal met Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai at the Indian embassy in Doha.⁴⁴ This can be seen as an example of Qatar's building of influence using mediation as a significant part of its foreign policy, as hosting the Taliban may have influenced India's choice for its new top envoy for Qatar. If the UAE is today a critical strategic posting from Indian diplomacy point of view, the Afghanistan issue has made sure that so is Qatar.

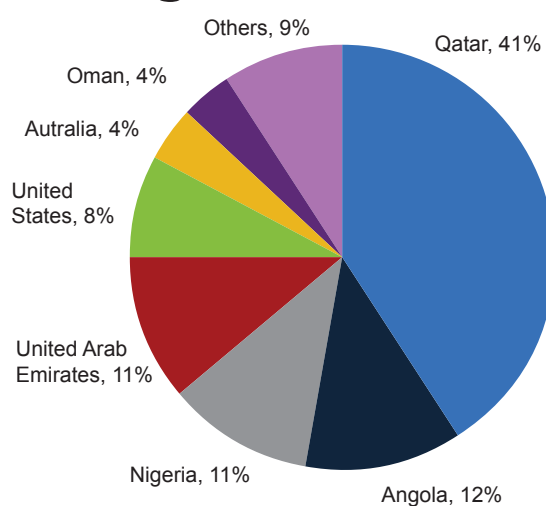
“Doha's mediation between the US and the Taliban is largely about prestige, and meant to strengthen its relations with the West.”

India's Policy Contours with Qatar

Qatar's policy choices and support for Islamist politics is problematic from an Indian perspective. This is specifically true when there is a level of optimism in New Delhi over Saudi Arabia's moves in the past few years: clamping down on extremism within its own geography, promoting a version of a more moderate interpretation of Islam not only in Saudi Arabia but across other states such as Egypt as well, and moving to open up its economy to the world as it looks to reorient its economic reliance away from oil and create other industries to sustain its future.

Nonetheless, Qatar remains pivotal to India's energy security needs. As of 2019, 41 percent of India's annual natural gas imports were supplied by Qatar alone. Hydrocarbons, despite the current global push towards renewables and green fuels in an era of rapid climate change, will play a critical role in India's energy security and economic development over the next few decades. Indeed, India continues to suffer 'energy poverty' despite significant strides made over the past two decades.⁴⁵ The task to become energy self-sufficient in the next 25 years is monumental, as energy transition remains a capital-intensive, politically delicate, and financially slow endeavour.⁴⁶

Figure 1:
**India's Natural Gas Imports, 2019, by
Country of Origin**



Source: Statista⁴⁷

India's Policy Contours with Qatar


Natural gas, Qatar's cash cow, is also traded differently compared to oil. Sovereign deals between states largely dictate natural gas supplies rather than purely market forces (such as spot markets), making it more vulnerable to shifts in geopolitics and requiring deft diplomacy along with deep pockets for countries to deal with a handful of producers. The Russia-Ukraine war has trained the spotlight on the importance of LNG, as European states flocked to Doha for alternatives to Russian gas. Geopolitical pressures saw Doha looking into enacting 'diversion clauses' with big Asian buyers (China, Japan, South Korea, and India) to fulfil immediate requirements in Europe. It also asked the US, the world's largest producer of LNG, to apply political pressure in case such clauses would need to be operationalised.⁴⁸ Asian states that are reliant on imports were already known to be stockpiling LNG for the winter season.

Beyond energy security, Qatar is also an important destination for India to seek foreign direct investments (FDI). Indian diplomats in the Gulf have been tasked to secure strong investments. Qatar's sovereign wealth fund—the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), with its US\$450 billion worth of assets making it the ninth biggest such fund in the world—offers an attractive proposition for fuelling India's ambitious infrastructure and technology development programs. In May 2022, QIA tapped into India's fast-building startup sector, reportedly showing interest in ed-tech 'unicorn' Byju's.⁴⁹ The deal will see Byju's create a subsidiary in Qatar that will bring online educational products across the Gulf region. Byju's is also looking to raise some US\$500 million in capital, and the two frontrunners are QIA and Abu Dhabi's Sovereign Wealth Fund.⁵⁰ Beyond geopolitical competition, therefore, hydrocarbon-rich Gulf countries are engaged in a geoeconomics competition—a boon for investment-hungry economies such as India.⁵¹

Ultimately, beyond the Afghanistan crisis and intra-Gulf intramurals, Indian diplomacy has its eyes set on bolstering the country's economic commitments. The two critical factors to these aims—energy security and FDI—are available to be exploited by New Delhi. This would require as deft a diplomacy as traditional security and foreign policy demands have always called for.

Conclusion

India's engagements in West Asia, including with Qatar, have grown exponentially in the past decade. Qatar's foreign policy designs are regional in nature but have cross-regional implications due to its oversized role in global energy security.

Competition between energy-rich countries will bring benefits to developing economies. Qatar and like-minded small states need countries to invest in, to begin with. French philosopher Voltaire had said, "when it is a question of money, everybody is of the same religion." It may do India well to follow this tenet to attract foreign investments without getting unnecessarily caught in this region's geopolitical entanglements. For the Gulf economies that are rich in 'petro dollars', such as Qatar, the future will likely be less about geopolitics and more about geoeconomics. 

Kabir Taneja is a Fellow with ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org