

QATAR'S DEFENSE POLICY: SMART CHOICES OF A SMALL STATE

Dr Brahim Saidy | Qatar University | brahim.saidy@qu.edu.qa

Policy brief no. 24 | June 26, 2018

Presented at the conference: "Small States and the New Security Environment (SSANSE)", Institute of International Affairs and the Centre for Small State Studies, University of Iceland, Reykjavík, Iceland, June 26, 2018.

Abstract

Defense policy of Qatar to a great extent depends on the geopolitical situation in the Middle East and it's heavily affected by the instable relations with the Gulf neighbors. Qatar has conducted a defense policy characterized by a strong focus on the self-defense capabilities, bandwagoning and the military shelter. It important to emphasize that defense policy of Qatar is first defined in "self-interest" terms. This means that state power needs investitures to build and maintain a strong army or national defense system, an army that could be able of defensive and offensive activity. That is why Qatar allocates enormous resources and budgets to acquiring the equipment and services necessary to fulfill this goal. In parallel, the alliance strategy is the second key component of this approach. The blockade forced Qatar to review its perception of threats and reformulate a new strategy to protect its sovereignty. The new strategic environment generated by the blockade demonstrates that the threats are increasingly coming from its neighbouring states in the Gulf.

Key findings

- Qatar is identified as a small state that has been able to push above its weight through its aligned interests and some freedom of action within a geopolitical environment dominated by regional and global actors.
- Qatar does not break the tradition of the small state when it comes to the elaboration of the defense policy.
- Qatar's defense policy is driven by self-defense and the strategy of sheltering, but not neutrality. It was not possible for Qatar – within the context of the Middle East conflicts- to choose to stay neutral. This such status, could be not recognized by neighboring states and powers in the region, and does not provide it with guaranties to deter aggression and avoid access to its territory.

What is the problem?

Smallness weighs heavily on the defence policy choices of any small state. It explains its security behaviour, which most often ranging from balancing and bandwagoning to participation in the military alliances. Small states tends to rely on self-defense capability, superpowers for protection, security partnerships, and employ diplomatic and economic resources to ensure its survival. Being small “has been viewed as a handicap to state action, and even state survival”¹. Beyond, the differences or even disagreements between scholars regarding “what a small state is and how to conceptualize it analytically?”², the criteria commonly used in the discipline of international relations to categorize small state are fundamentally derived from the “concept of size”. This concept refers to quantitative criteria and qualitative criteria. The first is the state physical size; which includes the geographic size and population size, economic development size and military capabilities size³. The second relies on foreign policy behavior and the abilities of small state to show involvement in international affairs. In this regards, Matthias Maass notes that this definition based on the behavior patterns introduces a normative elements into the conceptualization of small states. For him, the characteristics of this behavior are “the support for International Law, working multilaterally and through international organizations, the reliance on diplomacy and the rejection of the use of force”⁴. In fact, the quantitative approach and the qualitative one are interconnected and complementary⁵. To paraphrase Máté Szalai, “the quantitative approach – in which a small state’s primary attribute is its scarcity of resources – translates the notion of size as a measurable variable, while the qualitative approach basically puts an equality sign between smallness and weakness”⁶.

The criteria used by these two approaches have a direct impact on the elaboration of the defense policy of the small state. For example, the indicator of the population size means that the country with small population would lack the necessary manpower for its armed forces. Small states will have trouble competing with those who have a large army. It is condemned to have a modest size of the military, which creates a recruitment problem and entails to adopt a specific policy to deal with military conscription. The issue is to find the appropriate way to “maximize almost all its potential manpower, and thus to deploy forces of a size which might compensate for their inherent demographic inferiority”⁷. In addition, the geographic size affects drastically the strategic thinking of the small state and is one of the most important element to constrain military operations. It places small state in a situation of lack of strategic depth and imposes limitations on direct threats. It also implies to organize the structure of the army in accordance with a specific concept of territorial defence and military commandment. Obviously, the space limitations affects defense policy objectives, including the ways in which the small state feels constrained by such limitations in seeking to adapt to its environment, and hinder or limit attempts to obtain some degree of security guaranties through the mechanisms of alliances and defense diplomacy.

A key concept is that of vulnerability that also defines small state in terms of lack of capabilities in regard to national security and weakness to ensure its own defense. Small state is more vulnerable compared with large state. Robert Rothstein notes

¹ Christopher S. Browning, “Small, smart and salient? Rethinking identity in the small states literature”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 19 (4), 2006, p. 669.

² Matthias Maass, “The elusive definition of the small state”, *International Politics*, Vol. 46, 1, 2009, p. 65.

³ See Björn G. Ólafsson, *Small States in the Global System. Analysis and Illustrations from the Case of Iceland*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1998.

⁴ Matthias Maass, p.79

⁵ *Ibid.*, 80

⁶ Máté Szalai, *The Inapplicability of Traditional Small State Theory in Central Europe – the Case of Hungary*, Research Paper, *International Visegrad*, 2015, p. 2.

⁷ Stuart A. Cohen, “Small. States and their Armies: Restructuring the Militia Framework of the Israeli Defense Force”, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 18:4, 1995,p. 89

A small power is a state which recognizes that it cannot obtain security primarily by use of its own capabilities and that it must rely fundamentally on the aid of other states, institutions, processes or developments to do so⁸.

In the same vein, Annette Fox wrote

We can think of small states as those whose leaders recognize that their own state's political weight is limited to a local arena rather than a global one, that they are dependent upon outside political forces for much of their security, and that their particular state's interest may be dispensable in the eyes of one or more great powers⁹.

In order to cope and seek to overcome the challenges imposed by vulnerability, a small state generally considers four things. First, from a realistic thinking, a small state attempts to take as many measures as possible of self-reliance, which is reflected in a strategy to maximize whatever internal resources may be available to maintain an army capable of defending the country from the enemies. Second, the most obvious survival strategy is to find one or more stronger states capable of sheltering and to join a military alliance that consists of direct and visible diplomatic and military backing. Such strategy is described as "bandwagoning": "requiring the protégé to align its behavior with the sponsor's, and perhaps to pay more concretely, for example by accepting bases on its territory"¹⁰. Third, a small state, motivated by its desire for survival, considers the option of "balancing" to avoid being dominated or threatened by hostile neighbor, but also to reduce the over-dependence on a single ally¹¹. Fourth, small state has another alternative that is to declare neutrality, non-alignment or non-allied status between competing power blocs. However, the cost of this option is high in terms of "building an independent defense capabilities to deter violations of neutrality"¹².

Qatar is identified as a small state that has been able to punch above its weight through its aligned interests and some freedom of action within a geopolitical environment dominated by regional and global actors. Qatar does not break the tradition of the small state when it comes to the elaboration of the defense policy. This later is driven by self-defense and the strategy of sheltering, but not neutrality. In the context of the Middle East conflicts, it's not possible for Qatar to choose to stay neutral because such status could be not recognized by neighbouring states and powers in the region, and does not provide it with guaranties to deter aggression and avoid access to its territory. How Qatar deals with vulnerability and resilience in order to maintain its national interests? To what extent can it handle various sources of coercion when constructing defense policy? The answer to these questions requires establishing a categorization of the Qatari case based on the criteria that distinguish small state as explained in the following table:

⁸ Robert Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968, p.29.

⁹ Annette Baker Fox, "The Small States in the International System, 1919-1969", *International Journal*, 24:4, 1969, p. 751-52.

¹⁰ Alyson J. K. Bailes, "Small States and Security: Does Size Still Matter", in *Small States in the Modern World: Vulnerabilities and Opportunities*, ed. by H. Baldersheim and M. Keating (Cheltenham and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc., 2015), p. 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

Table n.1: Characteristics of Qatar as a Small State

Criteria	Vulnerability	Resilience
Military Power	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cannot defend itself against external threats, i.e. based on its own power. 2. High reliance on external support. 3. High dependence on arms acquisition from foreign suppliers 4. Small standing army, combined with low war potential. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Alliance shelter relationships with Turkey. 2. Military agreement with United States of America (signed in 1992, renewed twice each time for a decade: Dec. 2002 and Dec. 2013) 3. Military cooperation with western countries (namely France, United Kingdom ...) and NATO. 4. Program of joint military exercises to achieve interoperability and enhance effectiveness of Qatari army. 5. Presence of foreign military bases on Qatari soil. 6. Ambitious plan to develop a Qatari military industry. 7. Defense procurement policy based on the acquisition of the advanced military technology. 8. Mandatory military service: Law n.5 (2014).
Economy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Small domestic market. 2. High dependency on foreign markets for imports and exports. 3. Low developed heavy industry. 4. Low degree of specialization in large variety of products. 5. Low economic diversification. 6. High dependency on the hydrocarbon sector. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. High GDP in absolute terms. 2. Good indicators in terms of Research and Development. 3. No dependence on foreign capital. 4. Strong fiscal positions with high budget surpluses and large stock of foreign assets.
Diplomacy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Little influence on the balance of power. 2. Regional instability. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pursues a dynamic and active diplomacy. 2. Large scopes of interests beyond neighboring and regional areas. 3. Strong public diplomacy. 4. Relatively difficult to penetrate due to the cohesion of the internal political system. 5. Strong support for international law. 6. Active presence and participation in international organizations. 7. Tends to maximize gains rather to minimize risks.

Source: The author.

It follows from the above that Qatar is in a process of modernization in order to counterbalance its “smallness” by maximizing its resources for military, economic and diplomatic purposes. Qatar’s resilience strategy¹³ has proved to be very adaptive to the changing of international system and developed mechanisms to defend the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity in every situation. As a small state, Qatar’s military power is on the defensive and entirely focused on its own survival, likewise its economy and diplomacy are operating to achieve this goal and balance or counterbalance threats and challenges generated by regional and international system.

Analysis

Qatar’s defense policy will be analyzed by using the categorization in the table above, which identifies many elements of resilience regarding the military power to overcome its vulnerability as small state. The concept of defense policy is used – in this paper – in terms of a plan or course of actions regarding the organizing, perception of threats, training, military equipment, and deployment of armed forces. In other words, it is a public policy regarding the actions that governments do or not to do to ensure its independence. It is the military component of the national security, however, these two concepts are not synonymous and a distinction can and should be made between them. The elaboration of defense policy requires a careful consideration of the threats profile facing a state, and the effective threats assessment is very vital in order to understand the strategic environment.

1. Military partnership

Qatar is involved in different bilateral and multilateral military partnership. It has a closer real-world military cooperation with the US, along with Britain and France. Military links with Russia, while not negligible, remain limited. Like other Gulf monarchies, Qatar looked primarily to the US for security guarantees. In 1992, Qatar and the United States concluded a Defense Pact, renewed twice each time for a decade: Dec. 2002 and Dec. 2013¹⁴. Qatar relies heavily on the assistance of western powers for its security and defense, which means that regional organizations, especially Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), failed to establish a mechanism of collective defense for all its members. The absence of a real regional military integration pushed Qatar to seek other security options provided by external power through bilateral security agreements. The credibility and efficiency of this option has been proven during the Gulf War (2 August 1990 – 28 February 1991) when United States of America formed a coalition forces from 35 nations to liberate Kuwait against the Iraqi invasion. This reliance by the GCC countries, including Qatar, on the Western assistance has led to different reactions. For the ruling elite in the Gulf, the western presence provides major advantages. It served as useful deterrent against Iraq during the period of Saddam Hussein, and still maintains balance with Iran. In addition, the ruling elites believe that this choice is essential to their national existence, and has positive impacts on their national armed forces in terms of training, interoperability and access the military advanced technology. However, Iran, Syria and nationalist movements in the Arab World consider that this strategy will not contribute to resolve Gulf’s security challenges. In contrast, it offers to western power, in particular U.S, to act as hegemon in the region and expose their regimes to high foreign penetration.

2. Defense preparedness

The defense preparedness in this strategy of resilience refers to the programs of joint military exercises to achieve interoperability and enhance effectiveness of Qatari army. Interoperability allows forces, units or systems to operate together and improve the ability of different armies to conduct joint operations. The programs of training, education and joint exercises have brought Qatari officers very close to many western armed forces. This interaction is carried out through three mechanisms:

¹³Abdullah Baabood, “Qatar's Resilience Strategy and Implications for State-Society Relations”, *IAI Working Papers*, December 2017, Roma, 27 p.

¹⁴ Brahim Saidy, “Qatari-US military relations: context, evolution and prospects”, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, Vol. 10, 2017, pp. 286-299.

bilateral military exercises; GCC-U.S military exercises and U.S military exercises in the Middle East in which Qatari army takes part. Qatar's objectives in conducting these combined military exercises are in the harmony with its defense policy seeking for more familiarization with armed forces of western countries. It claims to keep modern equipment, well-trained and motivated personnel with enough capabilities to provide minimal border defense, air and maritime security. The joint military exercises and all common training programs have significant value and are more useful for the Qatari armed forces. In other words, this provided valuable lessons for multi-carrier operations covering live-weapon firings, fleet air-defense, and maritime warfare. Without a doubt, these combined exercises helped Qatari army in appraising its hardware capabilities, operational planning, and human performance. In terms of self-Assessment, Qatari army can assess its defense preparedness and compare its capabilities with its counterparts across the globe. In general, the Qatari army as a small army made interoperability as a strategic goal in all its military partnerships to get ability to operate successfully and to enhance its effectiveness.

3. Presence of foreign military bases on Qatari soil

In the aftermath of the Gulf war in 1991, Qatar granted US forces substantial access to its military facilities. It hosts two US military bases: the As Sayliyah, which houses the pre-positioned equipment of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), and the Al Udeid Air Base, which is estimated to accommodate a total of 10,000 troops and 140 aircraft. Qatar invested \$1 billion in the 1990s to expand Al Udeid Air Base. For the American army, this base is used as an important store of war reserve material in the Middle East, and it is a critical logistical hub for regional operations. In parallel, Qatar hosts also a Turkish military base, which was activated following the blockade imposed on June 5, 2017 by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt against Qatar. After two days of this blockade, Turkey's parliament approved the agreement to establish a military base, which was signed in 2014. In fact, the presence of these military facilities on the Qatari soil is welcomed by the local population due to the protection that they supposed to afford in case of war, and its role to act as an response to any incitement to attack. Anyway, these facilities are contributing to the external and internal security of its host. It used as a security shield and to send a message from Doha to its powerful direct neighbors in the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia and UAE.

4. Defense procurement

Defense procurement is a vital part of any defense policy by which governments acquire the necessary equipment (military items such as weapons systems and non-military items) and services to allow to armed forces to fulfill their missions. The defense budget procurement is an important portion of total defense expenditure. The strategy adopted by Qatar to meet its needs in terms defense procurement was and still based on acquisition of the military technology. Over the last 20 years, Qatar has spent massively on advanced military systems and infrastructure, but sometimes beyond the operational capacity of the national forces. In practice, its weapons systems are Western with great dependence on French, US, and British power projection. Qatar has built up its defence capabilities over time to acquire an adequate defence capability adapted to the size of its army and territory. Its procurement policy has evolved many times since the country gained independence in 1971; it has been shaped by the relationships with three major suppliers: the UK, France and the US. The country kept a high defense spending for sophisticated and extremely costly weapons systems. In addition, the military procurement is deeply related to the question of interoperability. Given that Qatar wholly dependent on western countries to provide it with weapons, training, and equipment, it's in its interest to keep more unified defense capability in order to not impede interoperability and not undermine cooperation with suppliers. This variation is relevant in any defense system to allow for greater interoperability in the event of conflict and for joint military exercises.

5. Mandatory military service

Qatar maintains a small but professional army of approximately 27,500 men, including active duty troops and reserves. It claims to be a major or a dominated Gulf military power by keeping modern equipment, well-trained and motivated personnel with enough capabilities to achieve the missions of border defense, air and maritime security. This modest size of the military is a of recruitment problem. That said, there are some difficulties for attracting local population to join army and for that reason the mandatory service was implemented. Qatar's government has approved in 2014 the law No. 5 that introduces mandatory military service for male Qataris between the ages of 18 and 35 years. The national service training includes periods of military and security exercises for recruits in one of the armed forces units. This legislation aims to enhance the country's defense preparedness by mobilizing Qataris for the defense of the country and to ensure a regular army that would be backed up, if necessary, by reservists. Traditionally, mandatory military service has not been a major issue in the policy of recruitment of the Qatari army, which received substantial British support from its inception after the independence in 1971 and has long engaged national officers and expatriates from Sunni Muslim countries (especially Sudan, Pakistan, and Yemen). Unlike Saudi Arabia, for instance, Qatar has relatively small populations to staff the army. The new Qatari military doctrine aims to achieve a significant change in the military balance in the Gulf. This decision is part of a strategy of defense modernization; and reflects the idea that the major advantage of mandatory military service is that it can serve as a powerful agent of socialization by bringing together young men from disparate socioeconomic background and help integrate them into a real community through training and shared experiences.

What should Qatar do?

There are several actions:

- The main line of argumentation is that Qatar cannot ensure its security on its own. It has to find a shelter. Since 2017, Turkey is deeply involved in the provision of defense support to Qatar. This reinforces Qatar's strategy to maintain a regional balance with its Gulf neighbours. Qatar should therefore strengthen its relations with Turkey providing it with strong defense shelter. Likewise, the Strategic Dialogue announced on January 2018 represents a key element to expand defense and security cooperation with Washington.
- Qatar can respond to the its complicated relations with neighboring states, which are a major cause for concern for its security, by expanding and deepening its self-defense capacity and institutional expertise.
- Qatar should find the way to absorb the military advanced technology that is going to acquire in the coming years into an effective armed forces in order to complete its military modernisation. Qatar is planning to spend billions of dollars to increase its military power, particularly its air force capabilities, but it lacks a staffing shortage. Amid the ongoing Gulf crisis, Doha had signed on June 14, 2017, a \$12 billion deal to purchase 36 F-15 fighter jets from Washington. The F-15 is one the most powerful fighter jets in the world, designed to gain and maintain the air superiority in aerial confrontation. In addition, Qatar concluded a contract with BAE Systems valued at around 5 billion pounds (\$6.7 billion) to buy 24 Typhoon combat aircraft; and another deal was reached with France to buy 12 Dassault Rafale.
- Qatari defense industry is nascent and still underdeveloped. It relies on OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) to enhance its capabilities. Since 2012, the country's arms imports in aircrafts, missile systems and armored vehicles are dominated by US suppliers, followed by French one. In 2018, the country established Barzan Holdings as the first defense company for investment in military industry. This company acts also as an advisor

for the Ministry of Defense with respect the military procurement by providing research and development as well as knowledge transfer for this purpose. Qatar needs to create the right environment by investing in national defense industry that should be imbedded in an approach of knowledge-based economy.