

Internal Factors that Influenced the Formation of Qatar's Foreign Policy

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Abstract: This article analyzes the key internal factors shaping Qatar's foreign policy, its position in the international arena, and the distinctive features of its foreign policy. The study highlights the importance of geographic location, society and demographics, economy, and political factors in this process. Furthermore, it examines the country's geopolitical strategies, economic resources, and role in international relations, providing a comprehensive analysis of the main factors influencing the formation of Qatar's foreign policy.

Keywords: foreign policy, geopolitics, Qatar, international relations, geographic location, society and demographics, economy, politics.

INTRODUCTION

Theories of foreign policy formation are among the important research directions within international relations. This article analyzes the global position of states, their foreign policy strategies, and the role of theories such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism in this process. In particular, Qatar serves as a case study to explore its geopolitical strategies, economic resources, and distinctive approaches in international relations, as well as the country's efforts to enhance survival and increase influence.

Geography. Geographic location has played a significant role in shaping Qatar's foreign policy. The teardrop-shaped country shares an 87 km land border with Saudi Arabia and is connected via maritime routes to Bahrain, the UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Iran, and Iraq. The absence of internal oases has required Qatar to rely commercially and politically on its neighbors for food and other essential products. It imported necessary goods from neighboring regions and primarily exported pearls to countries along the Persian Gulf. These examples indicate that the Persian Gulf states share an interconnected history, and geographic location has been crucial in determining their foreign actions.

Qatar's most important neighbors are Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Saudi Arabia has a historical record of border disputes with Doha, while Bahrain has a history of dominance over the country. These conflicts have persisted from the early 20th century into the 21st century. Disputes with Persian Gulf countries, as well as claims from both large neighbors like Saudi Arabia and Iran and smaller states like Bahrain, have doubled Qatar's sense of insecurity. Consequently, Qatar has understood the necessity of protecting itself not only from major neighbors but also from smaller states in the region.¹

Society and Demographics. Society and demographics have had a significant impact on the formation of Qatar's foreign policy. Historically, fostering unity and a sense of nationhood among the nomadic Bedouin population was a complex task. However, the presence of tribes living with loyalty to neighboring powers created an additional challenge. Because the stability of coastal cities depended on

¹ Lakshmi Priya, *Changing Foreign Policy of Smaller Gulf States: A Case Study of Qatar* (New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs, 2021), 16-b.

the Bedouins, Qatar's rulers had limited freedom of action and were compelled to keep them satisfied. To maintain internal stability, Qatar needed to have peaceful neighbors.

Foreign migrants have lived in Qatar since ancient times, and both the population and the rulers have become accustomed to social diversity. Before the beginning of the oil era, nearly half of the population consisted of Bahrainis, Iranians, and African migrants. By 1939, Qatar's population included Arab tribes, Sunni Muslims, Black Africans, and Persians. Currently, Qatar's population is composed of local citizens (11%), Arabs (40%), Hindus (18%), Pakistanis (18%), Iranians (10%), and others (primarily Europeans, 14%).² However, in recent decades, the numerical surpassing of the local population by migrants gave rise to the idea of a nationalization policy for the workforce. On the other hand, this policy was not warmly received by the countries sending the migrants. Aware of this, Qatar began making foreign policy decisions from this perspective. In many cases, Qatari workers faced disagreements with the managers of oil companies, who were primarily non-Qataris. In 1951, Qatari workers went on strike in opposition to workers arriving from the Dhofar region and were subsequently deported to Oman. Eight years later, a labor department was established, and in 1962, Qatar enacted its labor law.³

Politics. Qatar's foreign policy is shaped by the Head of State, the Prime Minister, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, while the decision-making bodies are the Council of Ministers and the Advisory Council. The provisional constitution of 1970 established that the Amir, as Head of State, would act with the assistance of the Advisory Council and had the authority to ratify laws prepared by the Council of Ministers. The ruling Al-Thani family has played a significant role in foreign policy. Sheikh Qasim ibn Muhammad Al-Thani defeated the Ottomans in 1893 and is considered the founder of modern Qatar. The seventh Sheikh, Khalifa ibn Hamad, played a key role in achieving independence in 1971, and his son, Hamad ibn Khalifa, established the Al-Jazeera television network and oversaw Qatar's transition to a gas-based economy.⁴

Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani continued his father's reforms and strengthened Qatar's foreign policy. The foundation of this policy was established by Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber bin Muhammad Al-Thani (HBJ), who, as Foreign Minister from 1995 to 2013, expanded Qatar's global influence. HBJ placed great emphasis on sports and played a key role in securing the rights for Qatar to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.⁵

Islam has influenced Qatar's foreign policy, promoting principles of justice, honesty, and generosity. Through the Qatar Red Crescent Society, the country provides aid in more than 22 countries using zakat funds.⁶ At the same time, perceptions that Qatar supports Islamic groups in the region have led to tensions with neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt.

Internal needs have also influenced foreign policy. For example, when neighboring countries imposed a blockade in 2017, Qatar accepted assistance from Iran and Turkey and was forced to adjust its import routes. Although shipping costs increased tenfold, Qatar maintained economic stability through new trade channels.⁷

² Lakshmi Priya, *Changing Foreign Policy of Smaller Gulf States: A Case Study of Qatar* (New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs, 2021), 17-b.

³ Helem Chapin Metz, ed. *Persian Gulf States: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993.

⁴ Thani dynasty, Ruling family of Qatar, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Place of Publication. March 22, 2023, available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Thani-dynasty> (Accessed on April 05, 2023)

⁵ Paul MacInnes, Sheikh Jassim: Manchester United suitor and 'The Elite of the Elite', Place of Publication. February 25, 2023.

⁶ Zakat, Qatar Red Crescent.

⁷ Qatar crisis: What you need to know, Place of Publication. July 19, 2017.

Economy. The economy is a decisive factor in shaping global political decisions, including foreign policy. David Cameron emphasized that the economy is both the beginning and the end of everything. Qatar's economy began to take shape under the influence of external factors even before the discovery of oil. The discovery of oil in Bahrain in 1932 sharply boosted that country's economy, and in response, Qatar joined OPEC in 1961 to increase the revenues and influence of its oil companies. After achieving independence, Qatar nationalized its oil industry.

Qatar launched the Dolphin Gas Pipeline, one of the largest energy projects in the region. Initiated in 1999, the project aimed to transport natural gas from Qatar's North Field to the UAE and Oman. The project faced challenges, including opposition from Saudi Arabia.⁸

Qatar has implemented a series of reforms to attract foreign investment and improve the business environment. Qatar has invested over 400 billion USD in more than 40 countries and has signed investment agreements with over 60 states.⁹ QIA has invested in major companies such as Volkswagen, Deutsche Bank, HSBC Tower, the Empire State Building, and Rosneft.¹⁰

In 2017, Qatar was isolated by four countries, which caused serious damage to its economy. However, Qatar emerged from the crisis with Turkey's economic assistance. By the end of 2018, trade volume with Turkey had increased by 57 percent, reaching 1.4 billion US dollars.¹¹

In 2022, during the Ukraine crisis, Qatar strengthened its role through gas diplomacy. The United States and Europe turned to Qatar to meet their energy needs. Qatar's Minister of Energy, Saad Sherida Al-Kaabi, met with Western leaders and expressed his readiness to increase the volume of gas supplies.¹²

Qatar's foreign policy developed in various stages. In the first two decades after Qatar gained independence in 1971, having separated from the Arabian Peninsula, it did not have a significant foreign policy. Firstly, it was located between the developing states of Bahrain and Kuwait and was still occupied with internal issues and protecting its own territory. The main concerns of the leader, Sheikh Khalifa Bin Hamad Al-Thani, were reorganizing the government, making temporary amendments to the basic law, signing contracts regarding oil extraction, and establishing educational institutions.¹³ According to David B. Roberts, Qatar's early foreign policy is characterized by being obscure and operating under the radar.¹⁴

Secondly, the state's focus was on ensuring regime and state security through self-sufficiency, core development, and forming alliances. Before achieving independence, Qatar shifted its alliances among local powers such as al-Khalifah, the Wahhabis, and the Sultan of Muscat. In terms of alliances with global political actors, Qatar alternated its alliances between the Ottomans and the British. Therefore, in the decades following independence, a key aspect of Qatar's foreign policy was forming alliances to ensure security. After independence, Qatar maintained its sovereign policy by signing a friendship treaty with Great Britain, joining the Arab League, and becoming a member of the United Nations in 1971.¹⁵

⁸ Dolphin Pipeline: An historic moment for Doha, MEED, May 30, 2008.

⁹ Lakshmi Priya, *Changing Foreign Policy of Smaller Gulf States: A Case Study of Qatar* (New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs, 2021), 27-b.

¹⁰ Qatar continues investments across World. 2023.

¹¹ Türkiye-Qatar Economic and Trade Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey.

¹² Qatar relies on its Gas Diplomacy, Energy News, April 13, 2022.

¹³ Amiri Diwan, State of Qatar.

¹⁴ David B Roberts, The Four Eras of Qatar's Foreign Policy, *Comillas Journal of International Relations*, No 05, 2016. 1-17-b.

¹⁵ Amiri Diwan, State of Qatar.

In the following decade, the 1980s, Qatar's foreign policy began to be conducted under the leadership of Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad's son and crown prince, Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. He focused on diversifying Qatar's international relations, creating an image of Qatar as a flawless and neutral mediator, and branding the country as one of the most dynamic and forward-thinking states in the Gulf Cooperation Council.

In 1995, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa introduced changes in the domestic and foreign policy of the Gulf Cooperation Council state. He focused on expanding Qatar's natural gas production and export, ensured security by providing an air base to the United States Army, and promoted soft power through investments in mass media and sports. The establishment of the Arabic-language Al Jazeera television channel in 1996 was a significant event.¹⁶

Articles 6 and 7 of the Constitution of Qatar outline the main principles of foreign policy. At the center of Qatar's foreign policy are ideas such as preserving sovereignty and independence, and protecting the uniqueness of Arab and Islamic countries.¹⁷ The Government Communications Office of Qatar has identified as the priority directions of Qatar's foreign policy goals such as resolving conflicts through mediation, promoting sustainable development, and protecting human rights.¹⁸

After Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani became the Emir in 2013, Qatar's foreign policy underwent significant changes and shifted toward a strategy of employing soft, subtle, or smart power. Mehran Kamrava considers Qatar's foreign policy to be aimed at redrawing the geostrategic map of the region.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Qatar's foreign policy has been shaped by its geographic location, social structure, economic resources, and the decisions of its political leadership. The country has historically had complex relations with neighboring states and has sought to establish strategic alliances to ensure its security. Through effective utilization of oil and gas resources, investments, and a policy of soft power, Qatar has succeeded in increasing its influence on the international stage. In recent years, it has focused on mediating global conflicts and maintaining the geopolitical balance.

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¹⁷ Government Communications Office, State of Qatar.

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