

FIIA 18/2017

COMMENT

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Qatar engulfed: Tactical steps raise stakes in protracted crisis

The dispute over Doha's autonomous foreign policy remains acute as the parties to the conflict cement their positions. Breaking this deadlock requires mediation, preferably by a Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) member, plus the willingness to compromise, in order to avoid unintended consequences.

During the past three months, Qatar has signalled that it would not relinquish an inch of its sovereignty under external pressure. Ever since four Arab countries decided to impose an embargo on the tiny Gulf emirate in early June, it has assiduously stuck to its foreign policy line. Having been confronted with a set of maximalist demands, such as ending military cooperation with Turkey, or the closure of Al-Jazeera, Doha reacted uncompromisingly with a principled rebuttal.

In complete contravention of the demands, military cooperation with Turkey has been enhanced, Al-Jazeera news coverage is running as usual and, albeit less controversially, Qatari soft power was displayed with the recent deal around the global soccer star Neymar. On top of that, in a move to accommodate the interests of its most powerful global ally, a pragmatic combination of toughened terrorism legislation and substantial arms deals has been proposed to Washington.

By making timely use of these tested dimensions of its foreign policy toolbox, linking traditional diplomacy with public relations, Qatar has been able to reinforce its alliances, recalibrate its regional standing, and uphold its image as an independent country. In sum, Qatari Emir Tamim Al Thani sent out strong

signals of autonomy and self-confidence, effectively neutralising the prevalent Saudi drive for hegemony. But this obstinate counter-balancing act raises the stakes by deepening existing cleavages and increasing the cost of concessions.

The first downside is further aggravation of its detractors, above all Saudi Arabia, which feels deeply antagonised by Doha's amicable relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, and the non-alignment with its foreign policy more generally. The second issue concerns the risk of triggering unintended consequences: it is hard to imagine, for instance, that the recent upgrading of Qatar's diplomatic relations with Iran is in Riyadh's interest. Finally, as positions are drifting further apart, this confrontational mode reduces the room for negotiations, rendering the task for mediators even more daunting.

The current outburst of animosities rests on two developments: two decades of sovereign state- and institution-building by Qatar, and the disruption of the system of customary prudence in relations amongst the GCC members. As Qatar retaliates in kind to the demands, it effectively displays formidable levels of resilience, based on a multi-pronged foreign policy. Yet, by having acted as a friendly broadcaster of

the Arab uprisings, and by supporting Muslim Brotherhood ideology, Doha transformed itself into a threat to Saudi and Emirati regime survival. Therefore, it is perceived and portrayed as a key regional destabiliser by its adversaries.

Under its current, juvenile Minister of Defence and Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, Riyadh displays much less inhibition in regional affairs. Saudi foreign policy, including the management of affairs within the GCC, has reached a realm beyond consensus-building. Lack of patience coupled with incompetence mutually reinforce this trend, paving the way for confrontation among nominal allies. Accordingly, the bar has been set very high for Qatar – if not out of reach altogether. Worth noting in this context, Qatar supported the Saudi-led military crackdown on dissenters in neighbouring Bahrain in 2011, and even joined Riyadh in its – catastrophic – military adventure in Yemen. Furthermore, Al-Jazeera refrains from covering the ongoing Shia unrest in eastern Saudi Arabia. Still, Riyadh considers Qatari foreign policy illegitimate as a whole, and vies with Abu Dhabi to impose a high cost for its non-compliance.

Under such circumstances, with conflicting interests of this scale, preventing escalation becomes an

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extremely delicate task. Apparent overtures by the initiators of the blockade, such as temporarily easing restrictions on air space closure or opening the border to Qatari Hajj pilgrims, might be interpreted as goodwill signals. However, these steps are not essentially related to the demands, which remain designed to be rejected entirely, or negotiated in an open-ended dialogue. In addition, informal steps by Abu Dhabi to penalise banks with substantial Qatari shares point to another problematic aspect of the crisis. The potentially disrupting effects on international trade increasingly unnerve Western allies and partners outside the region.

Conflict resolution can only succeed around shared interests, not through bargaining about positions. Hence, defining common ground, such as the survival or strengthening of the GCC, might be a way forward. But Doha will not sacrifice its independence for this purpose. In order to resolve the conflict peacefully, its own threat perceptions need to be taken into account as well. And these relate more to its Arab neighbour than to Iran.

During the current crisis, it became evident that Qatar has been punching above its weight and overstressing statecraft in ways ultimately detrimental to its own

sovereignty. The resulting clash of ambitions between Doha and Riyadh exposed a deep rift within the GCC, while also revealing a lack of institutional capacity by this regional organisation to manage the crisis. Individual states and interested external parties are now facilitating negotiations. Meanwhile, Turkey and Iran have gravitated closer to Qatar's sphere. Nonetheless, amicable relations with Iran are stymied by a number of factors: Doha and Tehran remain on opposite sides in the Syrian conflict, the massive US military presence in the heart of Qatar can hardly please the Shia theocracy, while the effective competition over international gas markets is also causing disgruntlement. With Doha remaining firmly in the US orbit, the conflict boils down to defining the future of the GCC.