



Balance of Threat Analysis in Resolving the Diplomatic Crisis of Qatar and Saudi Arabia in 2017-2020

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v11i3.5528>

Abstract

The regional closeness of Persian Gulf countries faced a threat due to Qatar's foreign policy approach. Despite having the lowest military expenditure among Gulf countries, Qatar diverged from Saudi Arabia's policy of fostering stability in the Persian Gulf region to distance itself from groups deemed a threat to the domestic politics of other Gulf nations. Qatar's pursuit of greater democratic freedoms and a more moderate approach to international relations prompted Saudi Arabia and other Gulf nations to impose a diplomatic blockade in 2017. Despite this, Qatar's flexible foreign policy helped it avoid a prolonged domestic crisis. Establishing ties with nearby countries like Iran and Turkey and acquiring fighter aircraft from France and the United States garnered international support beyond its region. This research will examine Qatar's efforts to navigate the diplomatic crisis using a balance of threat approach—a key concept in Neorealism theory that posits an anarchic international structure requiring countries to navigate the global political stage for survival.

Keywords: *Balance of Threat; Gulf Country; Diplomacy; Foreign Policy*

Introduction

One important area in the Arabian Peninsula is the Persian Gulf, bordering approximately seven countries: Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. These countries maintain close political relations through their participation in the Cooperation Council of the Arab Gulf States, with Iraq being the only member absent from this multilateral cooperation (STEKOM, 2014). This collaboration effectively unites the interests of the Gulf countries and mitigates potential conflicts arising from similarities in the natural resources they produce.

The Persian Gulf region, despite its geographical and political proximity, has not been free of conflicts, particularly involving Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In 2014, Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic ties with Qatar, citing non-compliance with regional agreements prohibiting interference in member countries' internal affairs (Ibish, 2017). The break also called for Qatar to refrain from supporting groups that could threaten regional security and stability. On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Yemen, cut diplomatic relations with Qatar, leading to a significant division in the Persian Gulf region. This break was triggered by accusations against Qatar for supporting terrorist or

extremist groups collaborating with Iran, including the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, and Al-Qaeda (UMY, 2017). Qatar was also accused of promoting the messages and agendas of these groups through its media outlet, Al Jazeera.

Initially, relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia were very close, with Qatar being considered as the 'child' of Saudi Arabia under the leadership of Sheikh Mohammad bin Thani, the emir and founder of Qatar, and Faisal bin Turki bin Abdullah Al Saud, the leader of Saudi Arabia. However, this relationship underwent a transformation after Sheikh Khalifa, Sheikh Mohammad's son, seized power and assumed leadership in Qatar. Khalifa implemented three main strategies—economic liberalization, foreign policy projects, and state branding—successfully advancing Qatar. He altered the political approach by establishing closer diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia's adversary. Tensions escalated when Qatar and Saudi Arabia supported opposing parties in the Yemeni civil war. Qatar further opened diplomatic relations with Iran, initiated trade ties with Israel, and hosted a significant United States military base to shield itself from Saudi interference (Utami, 2019).

Several previous writings informed this work on Qatar's foreign policy. The first, 'Qatar's Policy in the Diplomatic Crisis in 2017' by Dea Sa'adah (2022), aimed to identify the factors influencing Qatar's policy during the 2017 diplomatic crisis. The study revealed two main factors influencing Qatar's policy: internal and external factors. Internal factors included guaranteed sales of oil and natural gas to other countries, economic diversification from the non-oil and gas sector, and the transportation sector's resilience to diplomatic crises. External factors encompassed alternative flight routes, assured food supplies from outside sources, the trade sector's resilience to diplomatic crises, and Donald Trump's defense of Saudi Arabia.

The second article, 'Analysis of Saudi Arabia's Policy Regarding the Qatar Blockade Viewed from the Perspective of Two Level Game Theory' by Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat and Ahmad Turmudzi (2020), aims to analyze Saudi Arabia's blockade policy against Qatar using the Two Level Game Theory perspective. According to the results, when viewed through the Two Level Game Theory, the factors prompting Saudi Arabia to implement a blockade policy against Qatar are evident at the national and international levels. Domestically, Saudi Arabia's actions are fueled by longstanding grievances against Qatar. Internationally, the blockade is influenced by Qatar's proximity to Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, both considered significant adversaries of Saudi Arabia.

The following article, 'Qatar's Efforts in Facing the Diplomatic Crisis with Saudi Arabia in 2017-2021' by Sandy Sunaryo (2022), aims to investigate Qatar's actions in response to the severance of diplomatic relations by Saudi Arabia and its allies. It seeks to identify Saudi Arabia's interests behind the 13 demands presented to Qatar, as well as assess the effectiveness of Qatar's efforts in managing the diplomatic crisis. The outcomes indicate that the crisis and blockade led Qatar to explore new suppliers beyond the Gulf region, fostering bilateral cooperation with Türkiye, Iran, and Oman. Saudi Arabia's interests behind the 13 demands reveal a security dilemma, attempting to disrupt Qatar's national interests and restrain its independence. The demands force Qatar into dependence and submission to Saudi Arabia, preventing its autonomy. Saudi Arabia's concerns during the diplomatic crisis are more focused on Qatar's influence in the Gulf region.

Next is 'Qatar's Efforts to Resist Saudi Arabia's Domination in the Middle East Region' by Amalia Putri Utami (2019), which aims to explore how Qatar resists Saudi Arabia's domination in the Middle East Region. The study reveals that Qatar seeks to counterbalance Saudi Arabia's influence by forming alliances with more vulnerable countries like Iran, Turkey, and Russia, thereby enhancing its influence in the region. Additionally, from a balance of power perspective, Qatar strengthens its economy and forms new alliances as a resistance to Saudi Arabia's domination in the Middle East, with implications for the international community.

This article examines the diplomatic crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia through a Balance of Threat perspective—a fusion of the Neorealism paradigm or theory. In this approach, the country,

represented by its highest state leader, analyzes the most significant threats facing the nation. The threat analysis is then addressed through the implementation of a balancing policy, either by creating norms or bandwagoning through cooperation with stronger countries (James, 2022). Qatar adopted a policy of 'resistance' by collaborating with other nations in anticipation of the diplomatic blockade in the Persian Gulf region imposed by Saudi Arabia.

Literature Review

Neorealisme

Neorealist theory perceives international relations as grounded in systemic anarchy, where states vie for resources and security, shaping their foreign policies based on national interests. According to neorealism, power is the paramount determinant of international relations, and countries strive to acquire and retain power in the global system. Power can be gauged through various metrics, including economic, military, or diplomatic measures. In neorealism, states are the primary actors in international relations, and their foreign actions are propelled by national interests that frequently clash with those of other nations. Security is regarded as the principal national interest, leading countries to compete for its preservation. This theory underscores the significance of interdependence among countries within the international system, involving not only large nations but also small countries and non-states (Scott Burchill, 2009).

Neorealism contributes significantly to understanding national security strategy by asserting that countries compete for security and power. Consequently, national security strategies should be rooted in strength and the capability to defend against foreign threats. The theory also underscores the vital role of the international system in influencing states' behavior. In line with neorealism, the international system can offer incentives or impose penalties on countries violating international norms. This fosters an orderly international order and can serve as a deterrent to conflicts between countries.

Balance of Threat

Balance of threat, a concept in neorealist theory, was introduced by Stephen M. Walt as an evolution of the balance of power theory (Dharmaputra, 2016). According to neorealism, the international structure is anarchic, lacking a higher authority than state actors, leading to aggressive actions and power struggles among countries (Dunne et al., 2020). This situation creates uncertainty, compelling countries to remain vigilant in facing potential threats. The concept highlights two ways countries can address threats: forming alliances with others sharing similar threat perceptions or engaging in bandwagoning (allying with a stronger or equal adversary) for protection against potential threats. In the balance of threat, a country's assessment of the threat magnitude from other nations is influenced by four factors: aggregate strength (military, population, and technological capabilities), geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and hostile intentions.

In the diplomatic crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Qatar implicitly applies the balance of threat concept to address the threats resulting from the termination of diplomatic relations by Saudi Arabia. This is evident in the formation of an alliance between Qatar and Turkey, manifested by the strengthening of military cooperation, such as the deployment of Turkish troops to Qatar. Additionally, Turkey engages in bandwagoning by seeking to normalize diplomatic relations with Iran. On the Saudi Arabia side, the application of the balance of threat concept is demonstrated through the formation of alliances with other countries equally threatened by Qatar's support for terrorism.

Method

This paper utilizes a qualitative writing method, a technique employed by social researchers to offer understanding and describe social phenomena (Flick, 2007). Researchers conduct qualitative

research studies by analyzing individuals or groups, interactions, and engaging in secondary studies through available documents. This method is employed to examine the issues under consideration. Through a qualitative approach, the researcher describes the diplomatic conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The analysis involves examining the policies issued by various actors and their interactions with other stakeholders to formulate counter policies, using texts and documents that have been released. A qualitative approach is deemed the most suitable for analyzing this issue.

Discussion

Initially, Qatar had close relations with Saudi Arabia, considering Qatar as a 'child' state under the leadership of Sheikh Mohammad bin Thani, the 'emir' or leader of Qatar, and Faisal bin Turki bin Abdullah Al Saud, the leader of Saudi Arabia. However, this dynamic shifted when Sheikh Khalifa, Sheikh Mohammad's son, seized power in a coup. Khalifa successfully developed Qatar through three main strategies: economic liberalization, foreign policy projects, and state branding (Fu, 2018). The political approach also shifted, with Qatar establishing closer diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, a known adversary of Saudi Arabia. Divisions became more apparent as Qatar and Saudi Arabia supported opposing sides in the civil war in Yemen. Additionally, Qatar opened diplomatic relations with Iran, initiated trade relations with Israel, and hosted a United States military base to safeguard itself from Saudi Arabia's blockade.

On June 5, 2017, a diplomatic crisis unfolded between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf countries such as Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt, severed diplomatic ties with Qatar and imposed economic sanctions, citing allegations that Qatar supported terrorist groups and strengthened ties with Iran, a known adversary of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia specifically criticized Qatar for supporting groups banned in multiple countries, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and the Taliban (Rakhmat & Turmudzi, 2020). Despite Qatar's denial of these allegations, stating they were pressured due to opposing political activities, the crisis persisted for several years, significantly impacting Qatar's politics, economy, and society.

The main causes of this diplomatic crisis are political competition and differing strategic interests between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Ideological and religious factors exacerbate the situation, with Qatar accused of supporting Islamist groups and strengthening ties with Iran, while Saudi Arabia adopts a more conservative approach to Islam and emphasizes close ties with the United States (Muhaimin, 2023). This crisis unfolds amid Qatar's efforts to establish itself as an increasingly important financial, business, and cultural center in the Middle East. Qatar's more independent and active foreign policy, including support for pro-democracy movements during the Arab Revolt, draws criticism from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states favoring stability and the status quo. Several complicating factors, such as differences in political and security views, border issues, natural resource rights, and even sports controversies, contribute to the complexity of the crisis. Overall, the diplomatic dispute between Saudi Arabia and Qatar involves a complex interplay of political, economic, social, and ideological factors.

The Impact of the Diplomatic Crisis on Qatar

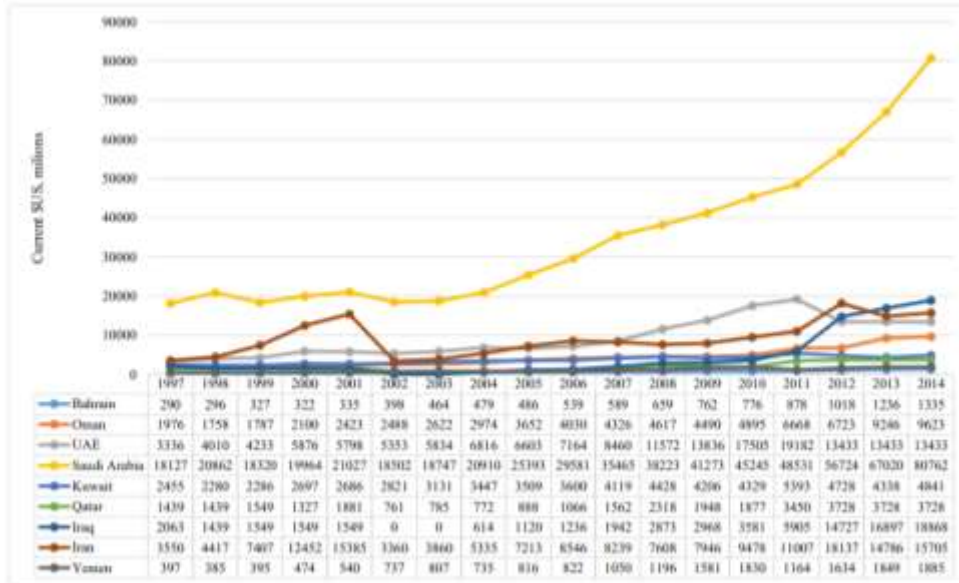
The diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia significantly impacted several key sectors in Qatar, starting with the Qatari economy. Economic isolation was a major consequence, as Saudi Arabia and other boycotting nations ceased trade and closed borders, particularly affecting the services and tourism sectors, leading to substantial declines in revenues. Foreign companies also postponed or canceled investment projects in Qatar. Despite these challenges, the Qatari government intervened by allocating \$38.5 billion to the economic and banking sectors. Notably, Qatar's economy received support from the income generated by the natural gas mining sector. Interestingly, Qatar continued to export natural gas to the United Arab Emirates, a boycotting nation (Smith, 2019). Concurrently, the Qatari government sought to enhance economic relations amid the diplomatic crisis by participating in the Arab Economic Summit in Lebanon in January 2019 (Reuters, 2019).

The impact on the security sector in Qatar encompasses diplomatic and military relations, domestic security, as well as military and defense development. Diplomatic and military ties with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were severed, resulting in Qatar's isolation from neighboring countries. This crisis introduced uncertainty regarding regional security and raised concerns about domestic security within Qatar. The government expressed apprehensions about terrorism infiltration and the negative influence of extremist groups exploiting the situation to create instability. Despite allocating significant funds for defense development, the crisis led to delays in construction projects and difficulties in acquiring resources and technology from neighboring countries. The severed diplomatic relations left Qatar more vulnerable to potential military attacks, especially considering the perceived favoritism of U.S. President Donald Trump toward Saudi Arabia. However, Trump advocated against a military invasion of Qatar and sought Kuwait's mediation (Planasari, 2017). The U.S. military base in Qatar, Al Udeid, served as a potential deterrent to military conflict. Furthermore, Qatar received support from Turkey, which sent troops to enhance defense capabilities at the Qatari military base. Qatar also bolstered its defense capabilities through military exercises and equipment strengthening.

Additionally, the food sector in Qatar faces shortages, given that approximately 90% of its food supplies are imported from Saudi Arabia and other nations participating in the blockade (Aprilia, 2021). Despite this, Qatar effectively addressed the issue by securing food supply assistance from Iran and Turkey. Furthermore, Qatar aims to reduce reliance on food imports by investing in the expansion of the local agricultural company, Baladna, to meet domestic needs (Ashary, 2020). The transportation sector also felt the impact of the diplomatic crisis. The aviation transportation flow in Qatar was disrupted as Saudi Arabian airlines were prohibited from operating to and from Qatar. However, Qatar managed to resolve this issue with Iran's assistance, which opened its air routes to Qatar. Omani airlines, maintaining neutrality in the diplomatic crisis, also supported Qatar's aviation transportation. Qatar reported the blocking of air routes to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), seeking new flight routes for Qatari airlines. Shipping routes from Qatar were obstructed as it previously relied on the Jebel Ali port in the UAE to handle cargo. Post-crisis, Qatar encountered logistical challenges due to its ports' inability to accommodate large cargo ships. To address this, Qatar began anchoring its cargo ships in Oman and using shipping routes from Iran. Additionally, Qatar is expanding Hamad Port to accommodate large cargo ships, aiming to reduce dependence on other countries' ports (Rakhmat & Turmudzi, 2020).

Qatar's Response: Defense and Security Policy Approaches with Other Countries

When discussing traditional security aspects like military strength, Saudi Arabia stands out as the country with the strongest military among the Gulf nations. Data from the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), cited in a report by Anthony H. Cordesman (2015), indicates that Saudi Arabia holds the top position in the Gulf, followed by the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, and finally, Qatar.



Picture 1. Military Expenditures in the Gulf States
 Source : (Cordesman, 2015)

The data above reveals that only Iran has come close to approaching Saudi Arabia's military expenditure. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia's military strength remains nearly insurmountable for the Gulf countries. Qatar, in this context, emerges as the weakest among its Gulf counterparts. However, in navigating political realities, bolstering military strength becomes a crucial solution. The blockade imposed by Gulf countries compelled Qatar to seek ways to mitigate the impact of the domestic crisis. Qatar initiated efforts to reopen closed diplomatic channels in the Gulf region, and in this pursuit, Iran and Turkey emerged as its closest diplomatic partners during the blockade. Qatar sought Turkey's support, requesting the deployment of troops and the organization of joint military exercises (VOA Indonesia, 2017). President Erdogan of Turkey approved this request. In addition to sending troops, Turkey also pursued joint military exercises between Turkish and Qatari military forces.

Beyond cultivating military partnerships in the Middle East, Qatar is actively working to strengthen relations with Western countries. France, in particular, has been a key focus, with Qatar approaching the country for the purchase of several military fleets totaling €12 billion (France24, 2017). This procurement package includes the acquisition of Rafale fighter aircraft, hundreds of combat vehicles, and accompanying technical training provided by France. Notably, this isn't the first instance of Qatar acquiring Rafale fighter aircraft; in 2015, the country purchased 24 Rafale fighters from France, amounting to €7 billion (Tertrais & Gadel, 2018). France holds a significant position as Qatar's partner in Europe. Qatar's proximity to France played a crucial role, and during a visit to Doha, President Macron aimed to facilitate reconciliation between Qatar and Gulf countries (Aljazeera, 2017). Macron highlighted Kuwait's importance as a key actor in the ongoing reconciliation process.

The United States played a crucial role in the conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Despite its close ties with Saudi Arabia, the United States refrained from immediately isolating Qatar during the bilateral conflict in 2017. Doha serves as a key center for the United States Air Force in the Persian Gulf, and the strategic deployment of the U.S. fleet in Doha plays a vital role in balancing Iran's position in the Gulf and the broader Middle East (Gambrell, 2017). In efforts to strengthen ties with the United States, Qatar procured F-15 fighter aircraft, with the purchase agreement valued at US\$12 billion (BBC News Indonesia, 2017). Although President Trump later expressed support for the isolation of Qatar from Gulf countries, the extensive presence of U.S. troops in Doha, numbering no less than 11,000 personnel, placed the U.S. in a dilemma regarding bilateral relations with Qatar. The U.S. couldn't fully endorse Qatar's

isolation but supported efforts to curtail Qatar's backing of groups suspected of terrorism by Western countries.

The 2017 diplomatic crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia presented a significant challenge to Qatar's foreign policy, particularly in the realms of defense and security. In response to this crisis, Qatar implemented various foreign policy measures to safeguard its sovereignty and diminish vulnerability to economic embargoes and military attacks from Saudi Arabia and its coalition.

In the neorealism theory context, these actions can be interpreted as Qatar's efforts to maintain its position in an anarchic and competitive international system. Therefore, these cases can also be viewed through the balance of threat concept. It is evident that the existence of the Balance of Threat concept prompted Qatar to form alliances with stronger countries. This is exemplified by the alliance between Qatar and Turkey, manifested in the reinforcement of military cooperation, including the deployment of Turkish troops to Qatar. Additionally, Turkey pursued bandwagoning by seeking to normalize diplomatic relations with Iran. On the Saudi Arabia side, the application of the balance of threat concept is illustrated through the formation of alliances with other countries equally threatened by Qatar's support for terrorism. Qatar, as an alternative to Saudi Arabia, opted to strengthen its defense and security sector to achieve national interests.

The acquisition of Rafale and F-15 fighter jets from France and the United States has strategically positioned Qatar in bilateral relations with Western countries. Saudi Arabia has long been recognized as one of the key partners of Western nations, particularly the United States, in the Persian Gulf region. Historically, the US and Saudi Arabia have maintained various bilateral collaborations. Despite not being overtly hostile to Qatar during the blockade initiated by Saudi Arabia, the US supported Saudi Arabia's actions against Qatar. Qatar's decision to purchase F-15s during the diplomatic crisis in the Gulf region exemplifies Qatar's bandwagoning strategy in its relations with the US. This fighter aircraft acquisition signifies that the US did not completely disengage from Qatar, putting the US in a challenging position to reject Qatar's F-15 purchase. The involvement of France further fortified Qatar's regional standing. President Macron actively endorsed diplomatic reconciliation between Qatar and Saudi Arabia by providing support to Kuwait as the mediator for the reconciliation process.

A defense-focused foreign policy emerged as a key strategy for Qatar to navigate the diplomatic blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia. While Qatar lags significantly behind Saudi Arabia in terms of aggregate strength, the adoption of a defense-centric policy has allowed Qatar to strategically engage with partner countries, thereby enhancing its position in the Persian Gulf region.

Conclusion

The diplomatic crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia from 2017 to 2020 presented a significant challenge for Qatar's foreign policy, particularly in defense and security. Qatar successfully navigated this crisis through intelligent and strategic policies, backed by ample resources and a consistent foreign approach. In the defense sector, Qatar bolstered its military capabilities by modernizing and expanding its air defense system. Additionally, Qatar enhanced military cooperation with key allies, including Turkey, France, and the United States, garnering international support and fortifying its position against the blockade and embargo imposed by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf nations.

Qatar's defense and security foreign policy throughout the diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia has proven successful. The country has effectively preserved its sovereignty, bolstered military capabilities, and broadened its international relations network. This success underscores that, with a strategic foreign policy approach and ample resource support, even smaller nations like Qatar can effectively navigate and overcome significant geopolitical challenges.

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