

Status and Foreign Policy Change in Small States: Qatar's Emergence in Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Small states are just as easily seduced by status and glory as other states. When conceived as situated in a stratified international society, small states acquire an inherent tendency to overcome their disadvantage in conventional power terms through the pursuit of status. Hence, it is precisely because of their position in the international hierarchy, not in spite of it, that strategic ideas based on state size stimulate foreign policy change in small states. This mechanism provides an explanation to the question why the small state of Qatar has pursued such a high-profile diplomatic strategy since its emergence in the late 1990s.

Keywords: status, hierarchy, small state, Qatar, foreign policy change

Small states are increasingly becoming important and influential actors in international politics. Although the scale of their operations markedly differs from what larger states bring to the table, small states are not easily neglected in a world of disparate power relations. A close look at the diplomatic activity of small states nowadays reveals that their impact on international politics may in fact outstrip their theorised potential. Across the globe, small states form a significant part of the political and economic mosaic and are increasingly gaining greater visibility within global institutions. Small states perform meaningful, and at times highly consequential, functions in global affairs, from occupying key positions in international organisations to playing mediating roles in complex disputes. Small states are thus instrumental to the reproduction of international rules and norms; they do not necessarily take what they get, nor do they simply conform to the established way of doing things.

The Gulf state of Qatar presents a fascinating case for studying the increasingly assertive role of small states and their growing importance in shaping international patterns of change. As a

result of a highly beneficial combination of a small indigenous population and massive hydrocarbon wealth, Qatar has transformed its peninsula from an impoverished backwater to a sophisticated metropolis, boasting the world's highest per capita income and immense growth figures. Qatar's fast-paced economic development facilitated its emergence as an important diplomatic power broker. Amid a precarious regional context, Qatar has pushed forward with an activist international agenda defined by high-profile mediation initiatives and aggressive statebranding in the quest to achieve a position of international significance. The diplomacy pursued by Qatar since the late 1990s challenges those International Relations theories that predict that small states are trapped by dint of their material circumstances, either because of their capabilities or because they cannot overcome their dependence in global economic relations. As many observers note, Qatar consistently punches above its weight.¹

That small states such as Qatar should pursue an activist and energetic foreign policy is not as self-evident as it may seem. Pressed between two regional hegemonies, Iran in the north and Saudi Arabia to the south, Qatar has successfully avoided assimilation in either power's orbit. Careful maintenance of its international alignments has allowed Qatar to enjoy cordial relations with staunchly revisionist actors in the region, including Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah, whilst simultaneously providing the United States with a military base of operations in the Persian Gulf, from which the US could theoretically strike at exactly those revisionist actors.

Qatar's contradictory international relations cannot be understood merely in terms of a perennial quest for security and independence. Instead of adjusting to shifting political alignments and keeping out of perilous diplomatic entanglements, Qatar is often itself involved in initiating and shaping political change. At the outbreak of the uprisings in the Arab world in 2011 and 2012, Qatar enthusiastically supported the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, supplied Islamists in Syria with money and arms and gave the green light for the UN Security Resolution that secured a no-fly zone over Qadhafi's Libya, only to change course in mid-2013 under intense pressure from the more status-quo minded members of the Gulf Cooperation Council.² The maverick streak in Qatar's approach to foreign policy is clearly riddled with risk and opportunity. It raises important questions about the systematic incentives that drive the push for international visibility among small states.

¹ Cooper and Momani, "Qatar and Small State Diplomacy".

² Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*.

How should we understand the consistent tendency among small states to pursue an impactful and visible foreign policy, at times even to the detriment of their security concerns? This article argues that status-driven behaviour stimulates foreign policy change in small states. An understanding of the external environment as a realm in which material and ideational rewards are unevenly distributed allows us to see why policy elites in small states are strongly attuned toward improving their place in the international hierarchy through the pursuit of status. Such structural incentives achieve their full causal potential when conceptions about the role and function of small statehood lead to shifts in the dominant ideas held by foreign policy actors. Small states seek status not only when their material capabilities are low, but especially when they frame their strategic ideas on the basis of their size.

In making this argument, this article draws attention to the mechanism through which status-driven behaviour in small states is generated, and illustrates this mechanism by discussing the emergence of Qatar as an influential diplomatic actor in the Middle East. Given its vulnerable positioning in the Persian Gulf, Qatar serves as a ‘hard’ – that is, unlikely – case for the argument presented here.³ After all, the Gulf, has acquired a considerable reputation ever since the 1980s as a conflict-prone region in which excessive posturing of wealth and status can easily lead to foreign intrigue or invasion. With negligible military capabilities of its own, Qatar’s defence is almost wholly dependent on the United States’ security umbrella and may appear to make the pursuit of status little more than a marginal incentive. Thus, if status can be identified as a major foreign policy concern among Qatar’s ruling elites, sometimes more important than Qatar’s physical security, then we will have found strong support for the main claim of this article, beyond the specific case presented here. Put differently, Qatar’s changing foreign policy presents a critical test for the role of ideas in small states, even when small states are located in relatively less mature international societies.

This article is divided in three sections. The first section provides a cursory overview of the literature on small states through a discussion of the vulnerability and resilience of small states. The second section conceptualises the interface between elite policy views and the external environment in generating specific status-driven tendencies in small states and explains why this analytical entry point matters strongly for this particular state type. The third provides a case study of foreign policy change in Qatar and is followed by the conclusions.

³ Bennett and Elman, “Case Study Methods”, 505.

Small state foreign policy

The literature on small states is primarily divided between those emphasising constraints and vulnerabilities, on the one hand, and more recent perspectives that stress the impressive resilience of small states, on the other.⁴ The idea that the major players in international affairs are more deserving of attention by virtue of their more apparent ability to project power and influence across state boundaries is strongly rooted in international thought. English School writers characteristically argue that disparities in power create different responsibilities in international society, as “the management of order and the leadership of the diplomatic dialogue have been entrusted by general consensus to great powers”.⁵ The corollary assumption is that small states are disproportionally influenced by security calculations, because they face an overarching need for protection against the larger and potentially hostile states. When states confront restrictive strategic environments, it is expected that material concerns largely override the role of ideas in determining states’ foreign and security policies.⁶ In such accounts, the vulnerability, but notably also the resilience, displayed by small states depends on external circumstances.

Notwithstanding their increasing involvement in international politics, the dominant thinking about small states predicts that the foremost dilemma faced by these actors is their inability to protect themselves either militarily or economically against encroachment by stronger powers. Since small states operate in a setting where, as Thucydides famously observed, “the strong do what they will, while the weak suffer what they must”, the challenge of the external environment is seen to leave a permanent mark on small state manoeuvrability. The widespread tendency to derive behavioural expectations from these environmental pressures and constraints originates from the traditional schools of thought in International Relations that emphasise the systemic vulnerability and lack of autonomy of small states. Realist logic, for example, dictates that small states face a narrow set of foreign policy choices, balancing or bandwagoning, to ensure their continued survival, while critical and Marxist perspectives are pessimistic about the ability of small states to transcend a stage of economic dependency.

⁴ The theme of small state vulnerability is discussed thoroughly in Vital, *The Inequality of States*, but it also features in the neorealist writings of Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, and Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. Recent works putting emphasis on resilience are Ingebritsen, “Norm Entrepreneurs”, Steinmetz and Wivel, *Small States in Europe*, and Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* in the context of Qatar.

⁵ Watson, *Diplomacy: The Dialogue Between States*, 190.

⁶ Handel, *Weak States in the International System*, 36.

The emphasis on vulnerabilities in the political, military and economic sphere generate expectations for the kind of foreign policy that we might expect from small states. Small states are generally taken to be defensively minded, interested in keeping a low profile and positivity tilted towards global institutions and international law to achieve objectives.⁷ In addition, in a globalised economy, small states are perhaps to a greater extent susceptible to exogenous shocks from international markets and developments in the global trade regime over which they have little influence. Thus, external factors restrict the menu of choices for small states. Such determinisms are however less useful in a world where small states have begun to enjoy more international visibility and legitimacy than at any other time in history. More recent perspectives on small states increasingly recognise that small states are not always at the mercy of the stronger and more powerful actors and may actually achieve considerable agency to direct their own fate. The following section highlights the way in which two influential concepts in the small state literature, vulnerability and resilience, relate to Qatar.

The vulnerability of small states

How external factors constrain the units that operate within any given environment depends on the immanent capabilities of the units and their structural autonomy from those forces.⁸ Realists traditionally understand capabilities in the most narrow sense, that is in terms of hard power possessions, such as the size of a country's territory and population, economic resources and its military potential, which together determine a state's relative standing in the international system.⁹ Scholarship in this tradition agrees that small states are more "exposed to the vagaries of international security and economic competition" than their larger and stronger counterparts. Jack Snyder captures the prevailing realist consensus by arguing that since small states do not "enjoy a substantial buffer from the pressures of international competition", explanations that draw on domestic politics are comparatively less useful for small states.¹⁰

Critical and Marxist perspectives equally stress the constraining causality of external factors in limiting the autonomy of small states, but they do so by approaching the international environment as a hierarchical rather than an anarchical system. Based on the hypothesis that

⁷ Hey, *Small States in World Politics*, 5.

⁸ Harknett and Yalcin, "The Struggle for Autonomy".

⁹ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

¹⁰ Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, 62.

world hierarchy is determined by capitalist relations of production and control of world economic surplus, they point to dependence as an impediment for substantial autonomy in weak states outside the capitalist core.¹¹ Best articulated by scholars such as Immanuel Wallerstein, this hierarchy consists of an unevenly globalised state system, the units of which perform specialised functions in economic production and exchange.¹² Relations between the capitalist core and the periphery are marked by a global division of labour, with capital-intensive and technologically advanced production taking place in the core while the periphery provides surplus unskilled labour and raw materials.¹³ In such a setup, dependent states are likely to function as transmission belts for the core, exporting surplus from the periphery to the core and importing capitalist social relations from the core to the periphery.¹⁴ State elites in dependent states facilitate this process by acquiring a class identity that is materially and ideologically tied to the hegemon in the capitalist core, under whose coercive umbrella state elites maintain their local authority. In short, dependency theorists claim that small states are not isolated units with an endogenous pattern of development, but rather globalised units with economic relations that are integral to the overall world market.

A focus on material vulnerability is certainly relevant in discussing Qatar. Qatar's accelerating enmeshment in global networks is primarily the result of the enormous crude oil and natural gas reserves that are located in the soil and waters of its peninsula and the sustained global energy demand that puts it in a favourable position to leverage these resources. The capitalisation of its natural resources has, however, come at a price.

First of all, reliance on rentier income exposes state budgets to shifting oil prices, which can be extremely volatile and may lead to significant shortfalls, putting strains on the maintenance of a redistributive political economy that lies at the heart of the political order in the Gulf monarchies. Extreme reliance on natural resources and imported labour exposes the country to a host of demographic and environmental pressures, including rapid population growth, the emergence of a youth bulge, unequal resource distribution, food and water scarcity, and the implications of long-term climate change.¹⁵ Some Gulf experts argue that the rentier state concept fails to capture the increasingly complex commercialisation and financialisation of

¹¹ Dependency theorists generally talk about weak states, rather than small states, a term which conveys that states are at an initial stage of development and are therefore prone to great power penetration. It is appropriate to use 'weak' and 'small' interchangeably in this context, because both terms ascribe a similar sort of deficiency to the unit in question.

¹² Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World-Economy*, 6.

¹³ Galtung, "A Structural Theory of Imperialism".

¹⁴ Cox, "Global Perestroika (1992)".

¹⁵ Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf*.

the Gulf monarchies, as these countries enter a stage of “late rentierism”.¹⁶ Khaleeji capital has certainly become more central to regional finance in recent years as local investment vehicles like Sovereign Wealth Funds and GCC-based private equity firms, banks and stock exchanges have invaded capital markets in the Arab world and beyond. However, the non-hydrocarbon private sector growth in recent decades has not led to a fundamental diversification of the economy. There is a lingering dependence on the vicissitudes of global markets that ensure Qatar a steady supply of rents and labour.¹⁷

Second, new globalising patterns involving the crossborder flow of people, ideas and capital increasingly “bypass state structures and controls and constitute both an ideational and material threat to their polities”.¹⁸ Adherents of the ‘omnibalancing theory’ explain that the calculations of the ruling elite in the Gulf countries are strongly shaped by the desire to counter security threats that arise across state boundaries, forcing regimes to respond to the overall balance of political forces with which they have to contend, including internal threats which are often more important than the threats emanating from interstate competition.¹⁹

Qatar’s ruling elite has perhaps more to fear from a restive migrant labour community and internal Islamists than from its state neighbours. GCC officials routinely castigate migrant workers as “a strategic threat” and consider labour a “national security issue”, making it easier to justify repressive laws against them.²⁰

For Qatar’s royal family, the appearance of ideological and religious purity remains just as important as is its ability to provide continuing economic growth to its domestic clients. In this sense, state security is best perceived through the particular ideational and cultural context in which Qatar is embedded, and as such, balancing can be aimed at overcoming ideological threats and subversion from a variety of actors, rather than flowing from an epiphenomenal response to shifts in the distribution of power in the international system.²¹

Omnibalancing is a crucial corrective in making shifting alliances intelligible in places such as Qatar, where a long history of nationhood is missing and where sub-state and supra-state loyalties cut across state boundaries.²²

¹⁶ Gray, *Qatar*.

¹⁷ Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf*.

¹⁸ Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf*, 2.

¹⁹ Nonneman, “Determinants of Saudi Foreign Policy”.

²⁰ Quoted in Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf*, 65.

²¹ David, *Choosing Sides*.

²² Hinnebusch, *International Politics of Middle East*, 54-72.

Lastly, that Qatar's vulnerabilities are increasingly non-military in nature is significantly augmented by the physical and symbolic presence of the United States in the region. While there has been a gradual attenuation of interstate threats facing the Gulf monarchies since the end of the Cold War, the potential for state autonomy is clearly tied to a permissive international context and cannot be seen separately from the rise of US prominence in the Persian Gulf following the second Gulf War. In the wake of Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Qatar concluded a beneficial Defence Cooperation Agreement with Washington, giving the US a considerable stake in domestic stability. Renewed in April 2003, the agreement facilitated the redeployment of US forces, previously stationed at the Prince Sultan airbase in Saudi Arabia, to the southwest of Doha, including basing hubs for the US Central Command (CENTCOM).²³ The primary lesson drawn from Saddam Hussein's failed annexation of Kuwait was that the possession of a standing army and sophisticated weaponry is in itself insufficient to guarantee survival. Instead, small states with "tangible interdependencies and powerful international partners" could count on international support during times of crises.²⁴ The security umbrella of the United States relieves Qatar from investing in military capabilities, an area in which it could not really compete anyway, allowing it instead to divert vulnerability mitigation efforts into other areas.

The resilience of small states

The notion of resilience has been a part of the literature on small states from the outset. Even as early scholars of small states laboured under the assumption that small states were inescapably constrained by systemic pressures, they acknowledged that the vulnerability of small states could be mitigated by intrinsic (permanent) and contingent (ephemeral) conditions, such as the level of economic development, internal stability, support of the population and geographical proximity to areas of strategic interest. Already in 1967, David Vital conceded that there was not necessarily a relationship between smallness and low state capacity and autonomy, as long as small states deployed skilful statecraft to offset their unfavourable position "by reducing an unfavourable discrepancy in strength, broadening the field of manoeuvre and choice, and increasing the total resources on which the state can count in times of stress".²⁵ Small states often possess certain assets in abundance, giving rise to

²³ Wright, "Foreign Policies with International Reach".

²⁴ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 27.

²⁵ Vital, *The Inequality of States*, 134.

“issue-specific power” through which they may levy their influence.²⁶ When small states concentrate their resources and effectively utilise their comparative edge, their leverage increases; examples are Switzerland’s and Luxembourg’s position in international banking, Singapore’s mastery of regional shipping and Qatar’s role in the global energy industry.

The logic of small state resilience and vulnerability mitigation extends equally to the economic realm. Just as small states have the inner potential to escape the clutches of security competition, small economies ensnared in global markets can change the conditions of their participation. Katzenstein argues that small states, particularly those too dependent on world trade to impose protection, and lacking the resources to transform their domestic industries, may resort to a strategy of complex bargaining and democratic corporatism in order to adapt to exogenous shocks and capitalise on market opportunities.²⁷ Institutional resilience and policy flexibility at home are thus revealed to be crucial coping mechanisms in dealing with pressures from abroad. In the Gulf, the extreme flexibility of the labour market provides rulers with one such coping strategy. When Qatar was hit by the financial crisis of 2007/08, it cleverly managed to displace the worst effects of market contraction on the expatriate community through massive lay-offs and forcible deportation of South Asian workers.²⁸ Indeed, smallness does not necessarily have to be treated at the level of interstate relations, where it has usually been studied; it can be treated at the intersection of the domestic and the international, where opportunities and relative advantages emerge.

A significant body of small state research challenges the view that the characteristics of the external environment have a powerful bearing on small state foreign policy. Writing from the perspective of historical institutionalism, Elman argues that domestic institutional arrangements are likely to have lasting policy implications, long outliving the conditions and circumstances responsible for their formation.²⁹ As a certain path dependence takes hold of the domestic decision-making context, established routines and practices favour certain choices rather than others in a given situation, whilst rendering international determinants less important. For example, Doeser explains how the strategies of government actors and opposition parties in the Danish parliament coalesced to facilitate a structural shift away from the Danish footnote policy within NATO.³⁰ In these and other accounts, domestic institutional

²⁶ Keohane and Nye, *Power and Interdependence*.

²⁷ Katzenstein, *Small States in World Markets*.

²⁸ Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States*, 179.

²⁹ Elman, “The Foreign Policies of Small States”.

³⁰ Doeser, “Domestic Politics in Small States”.

structures significantly complicate a reading of small states based only on their position in the international and regional balance of power.

The idea that small states can engage in a strategy of vulnerability mitigation on the basis of their niche capabilities and their institutional make-up has also been examined in the context of the small monarchies in the Persian Gulf. Qatar's management of its potentially vulnerable position is usually understood by country experts as a function of its adroit and calculated leadership. Mehran Kamrava, for example, discusses this quality in terms of three inter-related forces. First, at the international level, the rising importance of the Persian Gulf as a strategic region and the relative decline of the Middle East's traditional power houses provides small states in the Arabian Peninsula with unprecedented opportunities for an over-sized international presence.³¹ Second, the nature of decision-making and centralised leadership in the small Gulf monarchies gives political leaders the necessary responsiveness to capitalise on emerging opportunities as they develop regionally and globally.³² Thirdly, the ability of political elites to circumvent the wishes of their own population through a mixture of repression and co-optation increases a form of elite autonomy that is ultimately very conducive to swift and agile decision-making.³³ Policy organisation is made much more simple and effective when there are no complicated influences of interest groups that may desire a seat at the table. Since ultimate decisions are concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of individuals in Doha, new policies are formulated, transmitted and received through much smoother channels than elsewhere.³⁴ The highly personalised style of leadership and the flexible nature of Qatari state institutions make the conduct of foreign policy less institutionally determined and more prone to twists and turns. All of this leads to an understanding of the particular way in which Qatar deploys its small state capabilities, which Kamrava dubs "subtle power".

Thus, instead of assuming an insuperable deficiency in terms of capability and autonomy, scholars of small states increasingly recognise the impressive resilience of some small states against exactly those global pressures that they can scarcely control. Discussions about the choices open to small states have drawn inspiration from liberal and constructivist approaches regarding the position of small states in complex interdependence and institutions, and the active framing of cultural constructs and ideas. The influence of small states can reach deeply

³¹ Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, 17.

³² *Ibid.*, 66.

³³ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁴ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 34.

into international organisations, drawing on international law, international trade and even on symbolic conceptions of power. While great powers are usually, in the first instance, responsible for the creation and management of international institutions and for creating the ground rules for international regimes, such systems are left open to the active participation of all states, even as the supremacy of the erstwhile great powers decline.³⁵ In fact, once degrees of institutionalisation are set by the stronger and more powerful states, small states acquire “a legal and political language in which to speak about interstate relations, as a medium and a new resource for small states to manipulate”.³⁶

Small states may find themselves in a position to manipulate existing rules and organisations extensively to suit their ambitions. The use of what Nye would describe as “soft power” offers great possibilities for small states for whom the exercise of military coercion is not possible and whose immanent power capabilities are relationally construed.³⁷ Constructivists take the argument about the manipulation of ideas further and point at the alternative means through which small states project their influence, for example, by acting as norm entrepreneurs and norm advocates.³⁸ As an extensive body of research on decision-making within the European Union shows, hierarchical divisions between its member states are mediated in densely institutionalised policy areas, allowing small states to overcome their hierarchical marginalisation and operate at a privileged level similar to great powers.³⁹ Thus, small states’ predisposition towards institutionalised rules and norms in international fora should not be understood merely as a necessary condition of their immanent qualities, but also as a result of their place within a social whole.

Qatar’s extensive participation in international fora from which it was previously completely absent attests to the possibility of small states developing and exercising their resilience through membership of international organisations and active manipulation of their cultural and ideational resources. Having achieved election to most UN committees and forums, including the Security Council in 2006/07, and working through a diverse array of multilateral bodies ranging from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League to the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), Qatar’s internationalisation strategy is wide-ranging and not consigned to satisfying a purely status-quo agenda or nourishing the

³⁵ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*.

³⁶ Neumann and Gstöhl, “Lilliputians in Gulliver’s World?”, 17.

³⁷ Nye, *Soft Power*.

³⁸ Ingebritsen, “Norm Entrepreneurs”.

³⁹ Steinmetz and Wivel, *Small States in Europe*.

desires of its strategic partners. Beginning with the establishment of Al Jazeera in 1996, Qatar has sought to increase its international visibility, moving beyond the traditional display of diplomacy in international political institutions towards an active presence in the commercial and public realm. Broadly speaking, these initiatives are concentrated in five areas: “the development of the Al Jazeera brand, education and culture, sport, international travel and tourism, and cutting-edge global research and development in new and cleaner forms of energy”.⁴⁰

Qatar’s active foreign policy is usually understood as an outgrowth of its aggressive campaign for state-branding. In this view, marketing the country as an international hub for educational, cultural and sporting events delivers substantial international recognition at little cost. Statebranding pursued in this way attracts business and international investors. However, Qatar seems to be willing to go above and beyond its commercial thrift. Lavish spending on projects which have no immediate commercial gain all contribute to building and propagating “a positive, populist and enlightened” perception of a country that is modern, savvy, and distinctive from other states in the region.⁴¹ By transcending anonymity, statebranding through the strategic leveraging of soft power has the potential to create long-term mutual interdependencies which can ultimately enhance security and stability and give other countries a powerful stake in pursuing strong relations with Qatar.⁴²

Many scholars on Qatar’s foreign policy converge on the viewpoint that there is something instrumental about such a deliberate statebranding strategy. John Peterson, for example, argues that small states “must be able to reach a *modus vivendi* with their neighbours, even at the cost of surrendering territory or other aspects of sovereignty” and generally must attract a security guarantee from a powerful external protector. However, using a careful calibrated strategy, “they should [also] exploit a unique niche whereby the small state provides a service or commodity that benefits neighbours, the region, or the broader world”.⁴³ Statebranding gets increased depth when other countries regard Qatar as an impartial and independent broker, interested in providing mediation and conflict resolution to warring parties with no Machiavellian interests of its own. Rigorous neutrality reinforces the idea of Qatar as a committed global citizen doggedly pursuing peace in international relations.

⁴⁰ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 38.

⁴¹ Roberts, “Understanding Qatar’s Foreign Policy Objectives”, 236.

⁴² Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 71.

⁴³ Peterson, “Qatar and the World”, 741.

The discussion of vulnerability and resilience in the context of small states is useful in order to get a better grasp of the way in which small states apply more complex versions of power. It does not help us understand, however, why small states are driven to pursue international visibility more than other states. While it is undeniable that the pursuit of security and wealth may feed into small states' calculations to pursue an active international agenda, this tendency cannot always be attributed to "collective resilience", a supposed "counterpoint to vulnerability" or a strategic move designed to overcome the security dilemma.⁴⁴

Instrumentality in foreign policy is not always a given. Some aspects of Qatar's foreign policy may lie outside the control and manipulation of Qatar's ruling elite. Incessant statebranding is not just an "ethereal notion" based on selfless motivations, but it cannot always be subsumed under the "rubric of realpolitik" either.⁴⁵

Our thinking about small states is significantly constrained because we operate on major assumptions about what they want. Sometimes, we simply assume that they want the same things as other states – security, wealth and protection – making the small state category less useful as a tool for analysis.⁴⁶ And yet, "the social construction of state identities ought to precede, and may even explain, the genesis of state interests".⁴⁷ If identity is not seen as an analytically autonomous factor in foreign policy, then explanations regarding Qatar's external conduct may misrepresent, distort or conceal significant motives of social action. It is to this ideational dimension of foreign policy that we now turn.

Ideas of smallness in foreign policy

Why some states behave in ways that are not in accordance with their material interests is a matter about which constructivist scholarship has much to say.⁴⁸ In the context of small and weak states, Bukovansky's seminal account of the neutral rights policy of the United States of America⁴⁹ from US independence to the War of 1812 stands out. Even small states may sometimes privilege their ideals above their own physical security, leading to foreign policies

⁴⁴ Cooper and Momani, "Qatar and Small State Diplomacy".

⁴⁵ Roberts, "Understanding Qatar's Foreign Policy Objectives", 237.

⁴⁶ Baehr, "Small States: A Tool for Analysis".

⁴⁷ Bukovansky, "American Identity and Neutral Rights", 209.

⁴⁸ The classic example is Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.

⁴⁹ In brief, the neutral rights policy to which the United States subscribed entailed that belligerent states in times of war were not allowed to enter and search neutral ships for war material even if they were bound for enemy territory, a view which put the United States at odds with the great maritime powers in Europe.

that are fundamentally at odds with what a purely rationalist framework would describe.⁵⁰ Bukovansky provides a convincing explanation why the United States held on to a neutral rights regime grounded in the American tradition of republicanism instead of submitting itself to the maritime law interpretations of the big naval powers in Europe. However, she is less clear about the way in which the relational weakness of the United States in its dealings with European powers at that time interacted with its self-conception. It may be true that this aspect had no role to play in the construction of early US state identity. However, this problem complicates the utility of the small state concept because it “is primarily ... in the context of an international confrontation with great powers, or of small states as units in a context of a particular external problematique (globalisation) that the small state concept can defend its utility”.⁵¹ In contrast to Bukovansky, our starting point is to consider how small states like Qatar arrive at a self-definition and identity given their size.

Ideas in foreign policy are usually defined as the filter through which actors give meaning to their own actions and the activities of others.⁵² Thus, ideas of smallness emerge when perceptions about size become ingrained in diplomatic conduct and policy discourse. As small states develop deeper and more complex international ties, they find themselves enmeshed in differentiated relationships with other states. Once diplomatic exchanges are routinized, one emergent possibility for relational differentiation is size. This happens when a small state’s anthropomorphic qualities such as its identity, interests and intentionality are gradually subsumed under the self-perception of being small.⁵³ In other words, small states start to play a unit-specific role when the perception of smallness infiltrates the calculations of decision-makers and officials. Even the most strong-minded national executive functions in an environment wherein collective ideas, such as smallness, strongly condition individual preferences and attitudes. Following Steinmetz and Wivel, this article defines smallness as emerging relationally in the context between the state and its external environment.⁵⁴ It is the consequence of being the weak part in an asymmetric relationship that makes smallness a useful concept.

In a differentiated social space based on size, the positioning of actors must be hierarchical. Max Weber famously defined hierarchy as a “clearly established system of super- and

⁵⁰ Bukovansky, “American Identity and Neutral Rights”.

⁵¹ Knudsen, “Small States, Latent and Extant”, 185.

⁵² Gvalia *et al.*, “Thinking Outside the Bloc”.

⁵³ Wendt, *The State as Person*.

⁵⁴ Steinmetz and Wivel, *Small States in Europe*.

subordination in which there is a supervision of the lower offices by the higher ones”.⁵⁵ Weberian stratification theory offers a useful way of thinking about the place of small states in such hierarchical spaces. It becomes possible to speak about international society in terms of stratification when small states take subordinate positions in their routinized relations with larger and more powerful states and when hierarchical patterns persist over time. Thus, although meant in the first instance as a framework to describe the characteristics of bureaucracy, social stratification and hierarchy are features of social life that have an equally powerful bearing on the character of international relations.⁵⁶ John Hobson and Jason Sharman argue that hierarchies are themselves formed by ‘social logics’, which are recognised as legitimate by both the superordinate and subordinate parties.⁵⁷ As such, a differentiation based on size can be seen as an important ordering principle of international life.

What are the range of goals that may dominate policy circles in hierarchical spaces? Here, Weber develops a comprehensive scheme for the way in which hierarchical placement is articulated by social actors. He refers to the distribution of social power as emerging along three dominant axes: class (economy) as a result of access to the means of production; status, based on esteem (respect); and party (politics), derived from one’s dominance over a legal or administrative system. As phenomena of the distribution of power, hierarchies based on class, status and party “presuppose a comprehensive societalization, and especially a political framework of communal action”.⁵⁸ Stratification theory thus suggests that certain collective goals are not reducible to individual minds, but rather belong to categories that are themselves universal pursuits of human beings and, by implication, of states. While class refers broadly to the desire to accumulate material rewards, status may refer to the acquisition of such things as prestige, respect, honour or even moral clout. A key advantage of Weberian stratification is that it allows us to identify dominant structural dispositions of material and ideational origin, which are important in the domestic and international spheres of human agency.

In what sense do goals based on class, status and party inform hierarchically-situated small states? In an edited volume about Norway’s quest for international status, Benjamin de Carvalho and Iver Neumann make two pertinent claims about weighing the relative importance of power and prestige in the goals pursued by small state actors. Their first claim

⁵⁵ Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber*, 196.

⁵⁶ Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*.

⁵⁷ Hobson and Sharman, *Hierarchy in World Politics*.

⁵⁸ Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber*, 195.

is that “small powers suffer from status insecurity to an extent that established great powers do not, which makes the status game even more important to them”.⁵⁹ Because great powers draw status from their advantage in military and economic capabilities in a way that is not open to small states, small states compensate by pursuing status-goods instead. Thus, small states in hierarchical environments are likely to affirm their status and seek recognition more frequently than other states.

The quest for distinguishability, esteem and acknowledgement in international affairs becomes more profound for small states because of an exceptional need to cope with marginality in conventional power terms. As such, status-seeking can be taken as a distinct category in the context of small state foreign policy because it serves the distinct purpose of reclaiming subjectivity. It is precisely as a result of their systematic categorisation that small states seek recognition in spite of their size.

The second claim made by de Carvalho and Neumann is that “status is the condition of filling a place in a social hierarchy” and that the concept of status is “linked not to agency, but to structure.”⁶⁰ Whilst status refers to the structural feature of the system in which small states operate, this is conceptually separate from status-seeking which is instead an attribute of agency. However, this delineation is problematic because both concepts are clearly related. A focus on status as a structural incentive alone is incomplete and limiting in its analytical utility, unless it is meant to affirm the enduring importance of status in the foreign policy of small states. It does not explain, for example, what particular shape status-seeking takes in some countries compared to others, why some status goals are more strongly pursued than others, and why small states exhibit important variations in seeking status. Greater analytical purchase is obtained in examining foreign policy change when status is treated not as a systemic property, but as a set of ideas explicitly connected to the practice of foreign policy by state elites.

The importance of historical variability in status-seeking is clearly borne out by the example of Qatar. Its turn towards greater international visibility and aggressive statebranding was gradual. In the pre-independence days, Qatar’s foreign policy was conducted by and through London and decisions were taken in the framework of British geopolitical needs. After the British withdrawal east of Suez, Qatar and Bahrain refused to join the other Trucial States in

⁵⁹ Carvalho and Neumann, *Small State Status Seeking*, 1.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

an enlarged Emirates. The pursuit of an independent path, however, was made subservient to the Riyadh-Doha connection, as the Qataris “looked to Riyadh implicitly for direction in policy matters and in terms of basic security” and “followed the typical foreign policy decisions taken by other Gulf countries”.⁶¹ A deterioration in the relations with Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s and the simultaneous emergence of a new ruling class in Doha made permissible the idea that Qatar’s future could diverge from that of Saudi Arabia and other GCC states. Reciprocal recognition of Qatar as an independent state and, more importantly, a small state was further entrenched by the time Qatar signed basing agreements with the US in 1992, setting Qatar on a path to pursue the unconventional and outlandish policies it has now become famous for. Qatar was born as a small state, but more was needed for Qatar to develop into a status-seeking actor.

The argument presented here therefore features ideas as a stimulus for structural change, but it explicitly recognises that multiple factors shape the emergence of long-term dispositions in foreign policy. Strategic circumstances in fact cannot be divorced from processes of collective idea-change, nor can material and ideational factors be analysed separately when discussing the foreign policy of small states. Class, status and party as possible determining frames for individual and collective action are nothing more than ideal-types, which need to be kept analytically distinct, even though they are not autonomous in empirical terms. Ideas are important, not because they trump other variables, but because ideas interact with them to form “a structure within which individual and group decision making takes place”.⁶²

Status-seeking and foreign policy change in Qatar

Weberian stratification theory reveals that small states are structurally pressured into pursuing status goals when their material capabilities are weak and cannot be improved. This theory provides an alternative account of the shifts and contradictions in Qatar’s foreign policy. It also establishes that the structural incentive to pursue status only achieves its full causal potential when conceptions about the role and function of small statehood lead to shifts in the dominant ideas held by foreign policy actors. Small states seek status not only when their material capabilities are low, but especially when they frame their strategic ideas on the basis

⁶¹ Roberts, “Understanding Qatar's Foreign Policy Objectives”, 234.

⁶² Legro, *Rethinking the World*, 22.

of their size. This latter claim allows us to pinpoint the sources of foreign policy change in Qatar.

Qatar's emergence as an influential actor in the Middle East is a much debated phenomenon across the IR and Middle East Studies literature. Much of this work focuses on the strategic calculations of Qatari decision-makers since the 1990s, showing how domestic leadership changes have functioned as key critical junctures in Qatar's foreign policy, including the pivotal transfer of power to Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani in June 1995, and his abdication in favour of Crown Prince Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani in June 2013. The revitalisation of decision-makers from among the royal family, in this view, has ensured that the most qualified, judicious and shrewd have served in the foreign office in Doha.⁶³ This, in combination with the structural advantages that Qatar enjoys, such as the availability of massive oil and gas sources, the existence of a small and highly apolitical indigenous population and a cohesive and unitary polity, explains why a flexible and energetic foreign policy became possible.⁶⁴ Changes in foreign policy cannot be reduced to a change in leadership alone, though, compelling us to look to the broader environment to provide the context for Qatar's regional and international ascendance.

Nevertheless, there are two major problems with the existing explanations for foreign policy change in Qatar that Weberian stratification theory might be able to account for more effectively. The first problem is that it is easy to slip into a highly teleological – almost ingratiating view – of Qatar's leadership, ascribing impressive qualities to the ruling elite as if only their miraculous stewardship were important in saving Qatar from international anonymity and geopolitical doom. This is problematic because Qatar's international visibility is as much influenced by the resources that it commands as it has been by the things that it desires, such as power and status. If Qatar's foreign policy is understood only as a function of its immanent qualities, explaining why Qatar's resources have been deployed to such great effect, then capacity is mistaken for intent. Foreign policy transitions in Qatar have not turned out the way they did without ideational context. Max Weber compared such ideational dynamics to switchmen working the railroad, as “they point actors, like trains, down tracks in some directions, and divert them from others”.⁶⁵ While the capabilities that Qatar commands,

⁶³ Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*.

⁶⁴ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 104.

⁶⁵ Legro, *Rethinking the World*, 2.

and the use of it, are important in accounting for Qatar's rapid evolution, they do not necessarily explain the specific nature and direction of this change.

The second problem is that existing accounts do not properly assign causal significance to status as an analytically separate condition in foreign policy. As illustrated by Weberian stratification, it is necessary to keep the behavioural expectations that spawn from smallness analytically separate first, from the question of what Qatar *can* do, and second, from the question what Qatar *wants* to do. The reduction of status-driven goals to by-products of material factors creates significant problems in terms of accounting for foreign policy change in small states. While material and ideational goals are difficult to disentangle in empirical terms, Qatar's changing foreign policy in a number of areas achieves exactly that which is denied by the conventional view of small states: overcoming the security dilemma and dissolving the bounds of economic dependence. Moreover, this happens not because of vulnerability mitigation per sé, but because foreign policy change is acted upon by an ambitious foreign policy elite, strongly influenced by the hierarchical placement of their state in the international arena.

Status-driven visibility efforts are sometimes designed to be detrimental to the very goal of vulnerability mitigation. This makes Qatar's status-seeking qualitatively different from that of stronger and more powerful states. A full discussion of the manner in which this pans out is beyond the scope of this article, however, an overview of some aspects of Qatar's foreign policy involving a status-seeking perspective may be illuminating.

First of all, contrasting Qatar's mediating role in recent conflicts in Yemen, Lebanon, Palestine and Sudan to the manner in which mediation is traditionally pursued by countries such as Saudi Arabia, reveals a compelling divergence. Qatar's mediation is high-profile and bombastic, with a preference for mediation taking place out in the open rather than behind closed doors. Qatar's efforts are functional to its branding strategy, aimed at boosting Qatar's global reputation. But mediation is also a self-interested strategy intended to maximise influence by maintaining close ties and open lines of communication with friends and adversaries alike.

Whatever, Qatar's mediation has had mixed results at best. Even in cases where there have been diplomatic achievements, those successes "are often checked by limited capabilities to affect long-term changes to the preferences of the disputants through power projection abilities, in-depth administrative and on-the-ground resources, and apparent underestimations

of the complexities of the deep-rooted conflicts at hand”.⁶⁶ While the inability to follow through on early accomplishments maybe a sign of institutional overreach, it may also be the result of long-term policy success not being high on the list of Qatar’s priorities.⁶⁷ It seems strange that Qatar is willing to spend substantial financial resources to transport and host large diplomatic delegations for extended periods of time, while it is not properly equipped for the task of sustaining its activities with a serious institutionalised machinery focused on the long-term. Could this be a sign that Qatar is not really interested in being a serious mediator for its own sake, and that the main reason for its willingness to engage in such activities is the rewards that accrue from being *seen* as one?

Secondly, statebranding in Qatar is not just a strategic move aimed at creating mutual interdependencies for security reasons. Qatar’s soft power initiatives in the area of international media have, in fact, had a destabilising impact on its international alignments. More than any other organisation funded and controlled by Qatar, *Al Jazeera*, to take one example, regularly invites diplomatic controversy, sometimes even the scorn of regional and international partners. In the aftermath of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq after March 2003, Al Jazeera made a name for itself as one of the vocal critics of American policies in the region. Described by some US administration officials as anti-American, at one point there was even talk of US military personnel contemplating putting a stop to Al Jazeera’s coverage of the Iraqi insurgency by bombing its headquarters in Doha.⁶⁸

Lastly, Qatar’s hedging strategy is deployed inconsistently and is not always risk-free. While Qatar maintains open lines of communication with friends and foes alike, it systematically goes out of step to emphasise its independent position, much to the annoyance of the great powers from which it seeks to stay independent. Qatar manages relations with Saudi Arabia on an eclectic basis, preferring in general to stay as independent as possible from its southern neighbour, but at times also displaying a clear willingness to act in concert with it. As a founding member of the GCC, Qatar has often used the collective body to influence Saudi perceptions about its own ambitions and to mend ties with it during tense periods.

Hedging is easily discarded as a policy orientation when status goods are in play. In the activism displayed by Qatar in the context of the Arab Spring, Qatar was notably less interested in maintaining its honest broker role, and chose a strategy of taking sides, feeling

⁶⁶ Kamrava, “Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy”.

⁶⁷ Barakat, “Qatari Mediation”, 2.

⁶⁸ Fromherz, *Qatar: A Modern History*, 109.

that its international standing could not suffer the passivity exhibited by most other Gulf states. The perception that Qatar needed to be on the right side of history as the Arab Spring rocked the region, in fact cost Qatar dearly. Intervention generated resistance across the region, particularly on the Arabian Peninsula, leading to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain recalling their ambassadors from Doha in March 2014.⁶⁹ By embracing change in the pursuit of an exaggerated sense of international visibility, Qatar also damaged its ties with the Syrian regime, Russia and Iran.⁷⁰ While a rapprochement with the remnants of Assad's regime is now permanently out of the question, Qatar's Islamist clients are not fully satisfied with the aid they receive either.⁷¹ The Arab Spring left few winners, with the exception of Qatar, in at least the sense that others learned that it was a small state to be reckoned with.

Conclusion

Focusing excessively on the security-inducing and dependency-creating tendencies of the international system risks painting a picture of small states as perennially trapped in material structures. The literature on small states recognises that such constraints may be overcome by skilful pursuit of statecraft, either by leveraging niche capabilities or through a foreign policy strategy that augments the power of small states through international institutions and norms. Qatar's expanding foreign policy is certainly made much more resilient by the alternative ways in which it manages to increase its influence. However, not all activities of small states are intelligible in terms of a focus on vulnerability and vulnerability mitigation.

Drawing on Weberian stratification theory, this article proposes a more relational understanding of small states, situating them in a stratified international context defined by size. As a result of their hierarchical placement, small states acquire an inherent tendency to overcome their disadvantage in conventional power terms through the pursuit of status. Thus, when ideas of smallness take hold, the desire for recognition, intended to overcome smallness, becomes an analytically relevant factor in processes of major foreign policy change. Qatar's emergence as an influential regional and international actor cannot be explained merely on the basis of its increased capabilities and competences, whether understood as an increase in hard, soft, smart or subtle power. Key in the transformation of Qatar has been the ascension of an

⁶⁹ BBC News, *Gulf ambassadors pulled from Qatar over 'interference'*.

⁷⁰ Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 145-171.

⁷¹ Kirkpatrick, "Qatar's Support Alienates Allies".

ambitious foreign policy elite, who has seen Qatar's state-building inextricably linked to the projection of an autonomous and impactful foreign policy.

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