Creation of National Security in Small States
A Comparative Study of Qatar, the UAE and Singapore

By Ahmed S Hashim

Abstract
Small states have a hard time in the international system because of their lack of power. Most accept their place in a system favouring the strong. Others have sought to protect themselves through alliances or by making themselves indispensable through developing niche capabilities or adopting activist foreign policies. Fewer still have considered the pathway of developing military power. This paper addresses the efforts of three small states in the area of military or “hard power”.

Small states find it difficult to create security for themselves in a dynamic international environment invariably dominated by those who have power — defined briefly here as those with the ability to get their way in the international system because of their abundant possession of key material factors such as territory, economic resources, populations, and military capabilities. However, despite their acute vulnerabilities, or perhaps because of them, a number of small states have used economic and other means to transform themselves into “soft powers” by adopting activist foreign policies and “punching above their weight” in diplomacy. Few seek or are able to develop significant military power. This paper addresses why and how three small states — Qatar, the UAE and Singapore — have sought to create security for themselves through “hard power”, i.e., military power, among other instruments of statecraft.

Constraints of space preclude a detailed definition of small states, national security, and defence policy. The three states in question are small in terms of territory, lack demographic weight, suffer from other significant vulnerabilities, and are surrounded or hemmed in by more powerful countries. National security refers to the various efforts of states to protect and advance their core national interests, which are not just about preserving their territorial integrity and sovereignty but also about upholding their national values, identity, and way of life in general. Defence policy is narrower. It is about the procurement of weapons systems, the creation of military capabilities and the formulation of the best possible military doctrine to ward off threats to national security. Two of the three small states in this study have thought for a long time and the other (Qatar) only more recently about how to go about creating security for themselves by military means.

Qatar

From a Nobody to the “Magic Kingdom”

Qatar emerged when a number of Arab tribes from the Arabian peninsula wandered into the inhospitable territory jutting out into the Persian Gulf. Its birth as a state in the 19th century was fraught with danger. The Al Thani ruling family found itself embroiled in conflict with neighbouring rival sheikhdoms. The Qataris haggled with the mighty Ottoman Empire for protection, then fought it, and defeated an Ottoman

1 I have relied heavily on two of the best recent books on Qatar: Allen Fromherz, Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017), and Mehran Kamrava, Qatar: Small State, Big Politics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).
army sent against them. Ultimately, Qatar’s rulers sought the protection of the British, which lasted from 1916 to 1971. When financial pressures forced the British to withdraw their military forces from east of Suez, Qatar entertained but rejected the idea of unifying either with Bahrain or the UAE in favour of independence. Giant neighbour Saudi Arabia, with which it shared a Wahhabi religious heritage, emerged as protector of Qatar in the 1970s and 1980s.

From the mid-1990s onwards, Qatar transformed itself slowly but perceptibly and pushed against the looming presence of Saudi Arabia. Its oil reserves and especially its vast natural gas reserves — the third largest in the world — enabled this microstate with a native population of just 320,000–340,000 out of a total resident population of 2.4 million to develop and accumulate immense wealth, which it has used to provide all the material comforts for its population, the world’s richest in terms of income per capita.

It is Qatar’s foreign policy activism of the past decade and a half — enabled by its wealth — and its emergence as a significant international player that punches above its weight which has caught world attention. Qatar simply did not have military power in any measurable sense when it became a weighty international player under Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who took power in 1995.

Under Hamad’s son, Tamim, who succeeded him in 2013, Qatar upped its activism and has become an exemplary user of “soft power”. It engaged in nation branding and spun a positive narrative about itself to put the emirate on the map. It pursued an active diplomacy regionally and globally whose primary purposes have been to make as many friends and as few enemies as possible — “we don’t do enemies”, one of its ministers reputedly said once — and getting as many big states as possible to have a stake in its continued existence. It immersed itself enthusiastically in mediation between conflicting parties, promoted extensive cultural activities in the emirate and set up Al Jazeera TV channel, whose reporting has chagrined many Arab states.

Beginning in the second decade of the 21st century, however, Qatar suffered severe shocks, which made it pay greater attention to the consequences and costs of its activist exercise of soft power without much by way of a “hard” military power to back it up. Qatar’s diplomatic activism, its active role in the Arab Spring revolutions in supporting opposition forces in Syria and Libya and providing financial support to the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammad Morsi in Egypt, its perceived support for Islamist movements, and the liberties it allowed Al Jazeera led first to some of its Arab neighbours withdrawing their ambassadors in 2014. Then, on 5 June 2017, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE — the “Quartet” — severed diplomatic ties with and imposed an air and sea blockade on Qatar. Stunned by these developments, Qatar began to think about creating some kind of security based on military power.

**National Security and Defence Policies**

Until recently, Qatar’s military was small, ill equipped and under-funded. Its national security planning process was highly personalistic and limited to top members of the Al Thani family; no discernible institutionalised defence planning process existed, which explains why studies of Qatar’s national security policy were rare.

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8 On elite decision-making in Qatar, see Fromherz, *Qatar: Rise to Power and Influence*, 125-158.
Thus far, Qatar has beaten the Arab blockade through astute planning and intensive lobbying of powerful countries.\textsuperscript{10} It has vastly expanded its links with stronger powers such as the United States, which has the largest airbase in the region, al-Udeid, not far from Doha, and with France, Britain, and regional power Turkey, which is building a military installation in Qatar to house Turkish forces. Qatar is also engaged in a massive arms buying spree.\textsuperscript{11} It is expanding its air force with hi-tech fighter jets and is undertaking an unprecedented expansion of its tiny ground and naval forces. It is spending billions of dollars into making its military a formidable power \textit{on paper}; the reality is more complex.

First, the purchases are meant to be more effective politically, rather than militarily, at least for the near term. Many observers have questioned the ability of the small Qatari air force to absorb the purchase of 96 fifth generation Typhoon, Rafale, and F-15QA fighter bombers from Britain, France and the United States, respectively. The number of ground support personnel needed will be huge, and maintenance complicated, as will supply and logistics and interoperability issues.

Second, creating an effective Qatari military will take a long time. Qatar faces an almost insurmountable obstacle: its demographic deficiency. It cannot generate a sizeable manpower for all three services from its minuscule native population. To compensate for its manpower shortage, Qatar introduced conscription in 2013, requiring male citizens aged 18–35 to serve a 3–4 month period, later extended to one year. Nevertheless, demographic constraints will continue to affect Qatar’s force structure. It may have to consider building a robust deterrent based on its air force and, to a lesser extent, its small naval force, in order to make it clear to its neighbours that they will suffer serious damage to their infrastructure if they attempt to attack it.

\textbf{United Arab Emirates}

\textit{"Little Sparta?"}\textsuperscript{12}

For centuries, the region now constituting the UAE was known for its trading ports, which engaged in maritime rivalry and wars with interloping European powers such as the Portuguese and then the more powerful British. The latter turned these mini-emirates into a British protectorate via a treaty in 1819, which remained in force until December 1971, when the UAE emerged as a federation of seven sheikhdoms. The two most important members of the federation are Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the capital and commercial cities, respectively. These two effectively decide all domestic, foreign and security policies of the UAE.

\textbf{National Security and Defence Policies}

For years, the armed forces of the UAE were small, insignificant, under-equipped and under-funded.\textsuperscript{13} In the 1970s, despite tensions with imperial Iran over disputed islands in the Persian Gulf and with Saudi Arabia over their common border, the UAE did not encounter significant threats to its national security. The rise of revolutionary Iran with its ambitions of exporting its revolution and the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War with its maritime dimension awakened the UAE to potentially serious national security threats, particularly as the emirate is close to the critical Strait of Hormuz. The establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) by the Arab monarchies on the Arabian peninsula may have alleviated some of the concern, although the ruling elite of the Emirates may have realised that GCC military forces were not exactly effective at the time.

The war to free Kuwait of its Iraqi occupiers in 1991 truly awakened the UAE to the inability of the Arab monarchies to defend themselves. The UAE then began expanding its security horizons by signing

\begin{itemize}
\item[11] Paul Iddon, “In the air, on the ground and at sea, Qatar’s military shopping list is growing exponentially,” \textit{Offiziere}, 22 May 2018, https://www.offiziere.ch/?p=33510
\end{itemize}
defence and security arrangements with major powers. It also began an arms build-up. Initially haphazard, the UAE build-up was rationalised and the armed forces became more effective from the 2000s onwards. The creation of a national centralised armed force was the brainchild of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed (MbZ), the de facto ruler, and a small group of advisers, who realised that a national military was important to create a nation out of disparate sheikhdoms. MbZ has played the key role in the evolution of the UAE’s foreign and security policies, the development of its military, and in efforts to shape the regional environment into one less threatening to the UAE’s national security. While the 1990s marked the emergence of the UAE military it suffered from tremendous weaknesses well into the mid-2000s.

Currently, national security policy is focused on what the Emirati elite perceives to be specific threats such as Iran, all manner of Islamist movements, and disorder and instability in sub-regions abutting the UAE. Defence policy is now more institutionalised and defence planning more bureaucratic and formal. The UAE’s oil wealth has allowed it to procure some of the world’s most sophisticated weapons to create a relatively balanced force structure, which has been able to project power beyond UAE borders into Yemen, the Arabian Sea, and the Horn of Africa. Among its biggest problems are manpower issues — it has had to use mercenaries of unproven loyalty in the war in Yemen — and its undetermined ability to conduct combined arms and joint warfare. Nonetheless, the UAE military is the most active and most combat-proven military in the Gulf at present.

Singapore

**Vulnerable yet Strong**

Singapore is a 721 km sq island-state in South-east Asia with a multi-ethnic population of 6 million. It is sandwiched between two powerful Malay–Muslim states to the north and south — Malaysia and Indonesia — with whom it has had contentious relations in the past.

Singapore’s modern history begins with the arrival in 1819 of the British, who remained in various guises on the island until the late 1960s. The British recognised Singapore’s strategic location and transformed it into their major military base in Asia and a commercial and trading centre. Singapore came to be made up of a number of ethnic communities — Europeans, Malays, Indians, and Chinese — who headed there for economic and commercial opportunities, but it remained closely linked to a prosperous British colony to the north, Malaysia (then known as Malaya).

Given its small size, poverty, and lack of resources, the logic for this tiny territory would have been to integrate with Malaya, with which it had much in common. Singapore did join Malaya in the newly formed Federation of Malaysia in 1963, but quarrels over resources and racial tensions between the Malay majority in Malaysia and the largely Chinese elite in Singapore doomed the marriage, and Singapore was thrust unwillingly and unexpectedly into independence in 1965. Britain’s declaration three years later that it would withdraw from east of Suez by 1971 was a double blow to Singapore: (i) economically because the British forces contributed greatly to the weak Singaporean economy, and (ii) in terms of security because Singapore did not have a robust military yet although its ground forces had grown.

These were traumatic experiences for Singapore’s leaders. The ejection from the Malaysian federation was an existential crisis, according to its first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew. The British “betrayal” — they had promised to stay longer — left the country defenceless. Yet, since 1965, Singapore has successfully

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modernised and transformed itself into Southeast Asia’s most advanced country. The sense of vulnerability remains but it has achieved no small measure of strategic strength.18

**National Security and Defence Policies**

Singapore’s successful transformation — in spite of its small size, geographic vulnerability, and limited endowments — was due to the determination and pragmatism of Lee and a close inner circle — the “founding fathers” — in articulating a clear vision, an essential component of which was that Singapore should not lack in military capability. They implemented this vision in part through an effective national security strategy and defence policy.19

From barely having no military power at the time of independence in 1965, Singapore has come a long way militarily, possessing what is undoubtedly the most hi-tech and the best-equipped and best-trained military in South-east Asia. It has mastered — in theory, because it has never fought a war — combined arms and joint warfare.20 It is, however, “ready for a fight”, a mindset which deters would-be predators.21 Furthermore, Singapore’s reputation for efficiency and effectiveness, reinforced by its participation in the fight against the Islamic State and in humanitarian operations, has enhanced the country’s deterrent power, as has the perception that it can project military power effectively beyond its territory. This is no small feat for a small state.

**Conclusions**

There are some remarkable similarities, and equally some noticeable differences, among the three small states in question. First, they are clearly not “normal” small states in that they have bucked the consensus of how small states should behave in terms of both foreign and security policies.

Second, they were all former colonies of Britain, which relinquished its military presence east of Suez after 1971. All three, beginning with Singapore, were thus thrust into independence almost unwillingly and with great misgivings on the part of their rulers about their viability and security in regions of turmoil. However, unlike with the two Arab states, Singapore’s rulers put it on a path of modernisation and development without the benefit of oil or gas wealth, and the country was the first of the three to develop hard power, based on the transformation of the only resource it had: people. Singapore was born in crisis and surmounted it. The two Arab states suffered crises much later and these did help them to focus more on hard power. In all three states, however, foreign policy was also security policy, particularly in the early days of their respective existence.

Third, since there were few institutions in the early years of independence in all three countries, it fell on dynamic leaders and their ideas to develop and implement defence policy and national security policy, including state formation and nation-building. Both the UAE and Singapore have gone much further than Qatar in building solid institutions, including those for national security and defence policies. While Qatar has built some institutional capacity in some ministries, it lacks institutional capacity in the national security and defence policy arenas.

Fourth, the trio have paid attention to hard power by developing their armed forces, whereas most small states do not, for the simple fact that they cannot or do not have the resources to do so.

20 “Combined arms” integrates different combat branches — artillery, infantry, engineers — so that they support each other in combat to achieve more than the sum of their parts. “Joint warfare” involves different services — land, air and naval — contributing to the fight by conducting joint operations to achieve more than the sum of their parts.
Singapore put stress on military power from the very beginning of its existence in tandem with nation-building and the creation of a nation of Singaporians. From inauspicious beginnings in the 1960s and early 1970s, the Singapore Armed Forces have grown into a balanced force with a small but highly respected niche defence industry.

The UAE and Qatar came late to hard power. Military power played little role in nation-building in the early years of independence; rather, hydrocarbon resources did. Again, as with Singapore, crises and threats forced the two Gulf states to address military power.

The UAE, in the view of many, has built relatively capable military forces that can deter, and defend itself against, enemies, has projected power over considerable distances and has actually fought in medium intensity wars. However, its military experience in the war in Yemen that it is waging alongside Saudi Arabia against the Houthi rebels shows a steep learning curve, although the UAE has, in the opinion of many, acquitted itself better than Saudi forces in the field.

Qatar was the last of the three to realise the need for hard power. Military power played almost no part in its foreign and security policies until recently, even though its obsolete Mirage-III jets participated in the Libyan war to overthrow Gaddafi’s regime during the Arab Spring. The shock of the fall-out with its Gulf brethren and Egypt in 2017 sent it on a big arms buying spree. However, Qatar is a long way from developing a military that can deter, or defend the emirate against, predators, or project military power over long distances, which is why it will have to rely on bigger powers to safeguard it for a long time to come.

While this study has adopted a mixed realist-constructivist approach focusing on external threats, it is clear that all three states today face concrete dangers across the board that require the build-up of other means for maintaining national security. Their vulnerability to these dangers is magnified by the fact that the cohesiveness and resiliency of their respective societies is susceptible to erosion even without direct military threats or attacks. These kinds of vulnerabilities highlight the fact that national security and defence policy is not merely about security from concrete military threats, but also about creating and maintaining national identity, cohesion, and resilience.

About the author

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