Qatari-US military relations: context, evolution and prospects

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ABSTRACT

Military cooperation is one of the most intriguing dimensions of the Qatari-US relationship. It has progressively evolved, driven by a changing geopolitical landscape and security threats in the Middle East. In fact, it has a significant impact on the overall bilateral relationship, especially economic ties. It rests upon four pillars: a bilateral defence agreement, the use of military facilities, arms sales and military-to-military contacts. This paper analyzes the development of the military relationship that exists between Washington and Doha and offers an assessment of the issues that animate it.

KEYWORDS

Qatar; United States; military relations; defence agreement; military facilities; arms sales; interoperability; military-to-military contacts; small state; great power

Introduction

Military cooperation is one of the most intriguing dimensions of the Qatari-United States relationship. It is having a very positive effect on the overall bilateral relationship, especially economic ties, and it has expanded over the last 25 years even amid some differences over regional security questions. After the 1990–91 Gulf War, Qatar emerged as a partner of the US. These relations cover different aspects such cooperative defence exercises, military communication lines, interoperability of forces, procurement programmes, pre-positioning and base access agreements. Currently, Qatar serves as host to major US military facilities, providing the main headquarters and air operations centre for a reinforced US brigade in the Middle East. This relationship was formalized in 1992 with the creation of the Defense Cooperation Agreement and defence consultative talks were conducted by high-level representatives of the US and Qatari military authorities. These developments contribute to dispel misperceptions, increase the clarity of policy and provide a valuable opportunity to coordinate on regional diplomatic initiatives regarding security in the Gulf.

Qatari-US military relations raise the major question of how small states behave towards great powers. Historically, Qatar’s defence policy has oscillated between balancing and bandwagoning. The latter predominated and the key to understanding its relations with the US is to place them in the context of the state of Qatar itself. With its small territory and narrow population base, Qatar relies to a large degree on external cooperation and support for its security, in particular with the great powers. Qatar’s bandwagoning with the US is one prong of its national security strategy in order to adapt to changing regional and international mutations. From this perspective, this paper analyzes the
development of Qatar’s military relationship with the US. It explores the issues that animate this special relationship between Washington and Doha and offers an assessment of it.

Qatari politico-strategic considerations

The need for cooperation with the US has become a strategic priority following the Gulf wars and political crises in the Middle East. Like other Gulf countries, Qatar has come to the strategic conclusion that the military presence of the US as great world power is vital to ensure stability in the region (Darvishi and Jalilvand 2010). On the one hand, it was prepared for close military cooperation with the US given that the Qatari military cannot effectively and efficiently accomplish the military and security challenges in the Gulf alone; the job is too large and complex. On the other hand, there is a lack of a regional system of collective defence able to maintain regional security through regional potentials. For that reason, Qatar could not ignore the inability of the Gulf Cooperation Council’s (GCC) cooperative mechanisms to counter regional threats. Nor could it rely on the Arab League as a regional organization, although it introduced the Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation in 1950, because it has made little progress in establishing mechanisms to provide collective defence for all Arabs states. Therefore, strong military ties were established and still exist between the Qatari army and its American counterpart, which has enhanced its role in the region as a predominant partner (Kahwaji 2004).

The realist thinking in international relations theory dictates that this relationship demonstrates how Qatar behaves as a small state, constrained by its space limitations in seeking to adapt to its environment. This forced it to choose between a narrow set of options, namely a bandwagon approach designed to obtaining some degree of security guaranties through the mechanisms of alliances and defence pacts with Western states, in particular the US.

Based on its geographical size and population density, but not the country’s degree of influence in international affairs, Qatar is defined as a small state that has been able to punch above its weight through its aligned interests and some freedom of action within a geopolitical environment dominated by regional and global actors. In this sense, Rothstein (1968, 29) argues that a small state ‘recognizes that it cannot obtain security primarily by use of its own capabilities, and that it must rely fundamentally on the aid of others’. For Keohane (1969, 296), ‘a small power is a state whose leaders consider that it can never, acting alone or in a small group, make a significant impact on the system’. Indeed, space limitation generates for the small state a psychological perception that deals with vulnerability and resilience (Cooper and Shaw 2009). Within a hierarchical international system and given its limited military capabilities, such a state is perceived as not representing a danger to neighbouring nations. It avoids engaging in risky behaviour and would seek to ‘ensure multinational agreements and join multinational institutions whenever possible’ (Hey 2003, 5). Cooper and Momani (2011, 116) consider that ‘small states have revealed that they can adopt diplomatic practices that involve global networks advancing global governance on an issue-specific basis’. The Qatari case illustrates that it does not break the tradition of the small state when it comes to the elaboration of defence policy, especially the defence pact with great powers. Its small-state status has led Qatar to adopt a bandwagon approach in relation to its national defence. Bandwagoning in international relations occurs when a state aligns
with a great power. Bandwagoning can thereby help to contain actual or potential threats. But it provides a strategic advantage for great powers who maintain hegemonic control. Schweller (1994) argues that states can bandwagon with stronger coalitions in order to gain a profit, especially when believing them to represent the ‘wave of the future’, for ideological or psychological reasons. The concept of bandwagoning has been defined too narrowly, i.e., as if it is the opposite of balancing. Walt (1988, 278) distinguished these two concepts: ‘Balancing is alignment against the threatening power to deter it from attacking or to defeat it if it does. Bandwagoning refers to alignment with the dominant power, either to appease it or to profit from its victory.’ When choosing to bandwagon, a state acts on the assumption that it has joined the winning side in a given situation. We opt to define bandwagoning solely in terms of military capabilities.

In this regard, this approach of bandwagoning was – and still is – part of the Qatari foreign policy and defence, fluctuating from the protection guaranteed by the former colonial power to the current American role. That is to say, the independence of Qatar in 1971 did not solve the basic security problem posed by British withdrawal, which caused a vacuum of sorts with regard to its external security (Magnus 1997), considering that at this time the Qatari armed forces were merely symbolic. Qatar continues to keep strong ties with the UK, but by the early 1990s – especially after the Gulf War (1990–91) – it began to rely heavily on the US for its security and defence and increased basing arrangements from 1992 onwards.

Qatar’s ‘bandwagoning’ posture toward the US is also dictated by rigorous calculations, the objective of which is to stay on the ‘good side’ (McCoy 2010) of its larger and powerful Gulf neighbours, in particular Saudi Arabia and Iran. Historically, Qatar has maintained close relations with Saudi Arabia, the only country with which it shares a land boundary of 60 km and strong religious affinities given that both ruling families adhere to the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. In 1982, Qatar signed a bilateral defence agreement with Saudi Arabia which gave it at that time ‘the much needed assurance and confidence with regard to its security’ (Singh 2005, 387). During the reign of Sheikh Khalifa bin Al Thani (1972–1995) – grandfather of the current Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani – Qatar followed the Saudi lead in many regional and international issues. But there have been periods of tensions with its Saudi neighbour. In relation to Iran, Saudi Arabia’s biggest rival in the region, Qatar has adopted non-confrontational relations with it despite polarized positions and approaches towards different conflicts and issues in the Middle East, particularly the ongoing war in Syria and Yemen. Indeed, Qatar is less alarmed by the Iranian threat than the other Gulf States and it strives to keep more stable and peaceful relations with Iran due to its geographical proximity and economic interdependence; furthermore, both countries share the South Pars/North Dome gas field, the world’s largest. Unlike Saudi Arabia’s Shias, those in Qatar are attached to their Qatari identity because, from an economic and cultural point of view, they are well integrated in society. It is also important to note that during its tenure as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Qatar voted against a resolution setting a deadline for Tehran to stop its uranium enrichment in June 2006. In the words of Kamrava (2013, 74), ‘Qatar, then, needs to craft its foreign policy with deliberate care and caution, with an eye toward the Iranian behemoth in the north, the Saudi giant in the south.’ In fact, this strategy of ‘zero enemy’ was basically formulated by the former Qatari foreign minister, Al-Thani (1996), who noted that:
Qatar is indeed one of the smallest countries in the region. As such, our goal is to have friendly relations with all and run our country without interference. Being a friend to everybody, I might note, is a very difficult mission, but we are on our way. We have military cooperation and friendship with the United States and the European states. We have good relations with Iran. We have normal relation with Iraq. When people ask us ‘Why do you help Iran and Iraq?’ we reply, ‘They are our neighbors.’ We have to have an understanding with our neighbors that there will be no interference in our internal affairs. We cannot afford to have enemies.

Therefore, it would be appropriate to consider that it is in Qatari’s national interest to seek military guarantees from the US as a balance to the influence of powerful neighbours in Saudi Arabia and Iran. It is a classic vulnerable small-state policy to counter different geopolitical realities by bandwagoning with the great power. In other words, the ruling elite in Qatar realized that strategic relations with the US are necessary to ensure its security and prosperity in parallel to maintaining non-conflictual relations with other countries in the region.

The military agreement

Qatar recognizes that military cooperation with US is required to deal with any eventual military aggression against its territorial integrity and to ensure that ‘its neighbors do not try to encroach on its huge natural gas reserves’ (Katzman 2003, 2). As a result, Qatar signed a bilateral cooperation defence agreement with the US on 23 June 1992. This pact has subsequently been renewed twice, each time for a decade: in December 2002 and December 2013.

In terms of theory, this agreement should be situated in the appropriate type that encompasses the concept of military alliance. For Walt (1993, 20), a key researcher in the field of alliances, the latter ‘is a cooperative security relationship between two or more states, usually taking the form of a written military commitment’. In connection with this definition, Bergsmann (2001, 35) adds that an alliance is a promise, which ‘comprises an assistance in the event specified in the treaty, usually an attack on one of the partners’. According to Singer and Small (1996), there are three formal military alliances classified by the general obligation undertaken by the members of the constituent treaty:

- Defence pact: this requires its signatories to intervene militarily on the side of any alliance partner that is attacked militarily.
- Neutrality and non-aggression pact: the signatories of this remain militarily neutral and do not resort to military action against any alliance partner.
- Entente: the signatories agree to consult and/or cooperate in a crisis, including military interactions.

The Qatari-US military agreement enters into the third category. It is a written document, signed by official representatives of both countries, that includes promises to aid in the event of military conflict. It governs cooperation in many fields of defence activities such as training, technical assistance, and the supply of defence equipment and materials as well as the use by the US of military facilities located in Qatar. It is a testament to a
longstanding security and defence partnership, but it does not contain any indication or commitment to operate on the basis of the automatic collective defence.

Since its conclusion, this agreement opened a period of close defence cooperation in the recent history of Qatari-US relations which continues to the present day. The former foreign minister, Hamad bin Jasim al Thani, who signed this agreement in 2002 on behalf of Qatar, said that ‘the relationship between both countries is growing and is being built on a good base of understanding by both sides’ (quoted by Garamone 2002). Thus, it can be argued that this agreement is an institutionalization of that cooperation in terms of exchange, specialized technical committees and through the establishment of more closely supported working arrangements. It also reaffirms the US’s commitment to the region and guarantees its military presence at various bases in Qatar, especially as the ‘Gulf War experience of 1990–91 served to strengthen these ties and increase GCC’s confidence in the United States as a reliable ally’ (Kahwaji 2004, 53). The US has considerable experience in signing this kind of military agreement with different countries around the world. In the Arabian Gulf, it signed defence agreements with Oman in 1980 (on the access to Omani military facilities; renewed in 1990), with Bahrain in 1990, with Kuwait 1991 and with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1994.

The specifications and features of these agreements, signed separately by each Gulf state, are not widely different from each other.

Use of facilities

Regarding foreign military bases, troops and facilities are traditionally permitted only under the terms of a bilateral treaty, which is the case of Qatari-US military relations. They represent an important component of these relations. Qatar hosts two US military bases: one at As Sayliyah, which houses the pre-positioned equipment of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), and Al Udeid Air Base, which is estimated to accommodate a total of 10,000 troops and 140 aircraft. Both bases are valued for its defence infrastructure. A recent report of the Congressional Research Service outlines that:

Qatar invested over $1 billion to construct the Al Udeid air base south of Doha during the 1990s; it did not have an air force of its own at the time. [...] Qatar’s financing and construction of some of the state-of-the-art air force base at Al Udeid and its granting of permission for the construction of US-funded facilities facilitated gradually deeper cooperation with US military forces. Both Qatar and the United States have invested in the construction and expansion of these facilities since the mid-1990s, and they form the main hub of the CENTCOM. (Blanchard 2014, 5–6)

Al-Udeid base is a substitute for Saudi Arabia’s Prince Sultan Air Base. The latter was stationed in Saudi Arabia after the 1990–91 Gulf War. The relocation of US forces to Qatar was due to fear of terrorist attack6 as well as the internal opposition to their presence on Saudi soil (Gordon and Schmitt 2003). Qatar is now the site of the main US airbase and headquarters in the Gulf, and of the equipment for one US prepositioned facility. This explains the new importance that Qatar has acquired in the US’s regional strategy over the past three years. These strategic relationships are critical to safeguard US interests in the region in accordance with its National Security Strategy that calls for a much more rapid deployment of troops in the case of threats (The White House 2002). By
maintaining US military power in the Middle East, the bases represent a US commitment to regional order by supporting its allies and extending them effective security guarantees, as well by providing a counterweight to Iran and American rivals in this region like Russia. The diffusion of the ‘Iranian threat’ in regional security perceptions is likely to add to the already powerful sense that the bases exist to serve only US global power projection rather than playing an authentic role in defence. However, unlike elsewhere, American facilities in Qatar do not represent any significant contribution to Qatar’s economy, because they employ many expatriate workers, and Qatari contractors and suppliers have limited involvement in maintenance. Thus the facilities do not have any impact in terms of savings on defence expenditure.

Qatar’s Al-Udeid airbase served as a logistics hub for Operation ‘Enduring Freedom’ and Operation ‘Iraqi Freedom’, the US-led assaults on Afghanistan launched in October 2001 and on Iraq in March 2003. As well, Camp As-Sayliyah was used as the forward command centre for CENTCOM personnel during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Both bases are also being used in the air operation targeting the Islamic State militant group in Iraq and Syria. In addition to providing bases for US materiel and personnel, Qatar has also ‘begun allowing US P-3 maritime patrols to originate from its own ports’ (State of Qatar 2014). Briefly, these facilities were widely used over recent years and may continue to receive further investment to meet current and potential future needs. The use of facilities has become a key element that has strengthened political and economic ties between Washington and Doha. Following the war on Iraq in 2003, CNN reported that President George W. Bush told the Emir of Qatar: ‘You made some promises to America and you kept your promises. We are honored to call you friend’ (Koppel 2003).

In Qatar, unlike many other Gulf countries, in particular Saudi Arabia (Darvishi and Jalilvand 2010), US military presence is welcomed and is not facing any kind of popular criticism, probably due to the existence of a comprehensive conclusion that military cooperation with the US is necessary in order to prevent regional instability. In other words, this presence does not threaten the Qatari regime with the challenges of domestic legitimacy, which is attributable to the political liberalization engaged over recent years (Kamrava 2009). However, this does not mean that Qatar is used as a campaign launch point or there are no restrictions for American offensive missions in the region from its territory because the US cannot use these facilities without Qatar’s express consent. In fact, there is fundamental scepticism regarding the protection that US military bases are supposed to afford because, in the case of war, the presence of these facilities may act as an incitement to attack. The bases may be used for a range of purposes that could raise the disagreement of the host country by getting it involved in a conflict in which it may have no interest. This increases the host’s vulnerability, especially when its operational control is nominal. However, the US military bases are contributing to the external and internal security of its host, who uses it as a security shield. The future of American bases in Qatar is basically determined by any review of US posture in the Gulf. This should take into account the political effects of alternatives on its allies in this region as well the sources of the defence funding because these bases absorb a portion of the national budget.
Joint military exercises

Training, education and joint exercise programmes have brought Qatari officers to cooperate very closely with US armed forces. Regular joint exercises have been held and many Qatari troops have been trained by American officers, which has allowed US forces to transfer their expertise to the Qatari army. This interaction is carried out through three mechanisms: bilateral military exercises; and GCC–US military exercises and US military exercises in the Middle East in which the Qatari army takes part.

At the bilateral level, for instance, US forces launched their first joint amphibious exercise with Qatar on 16 March 1996. For this exercise, named East Maverick96,

the US force comprised around 4,000 sailors and marines from the Tarawa class assault ship USS Peleliu, the Austin class amphibious transport dock USS Denver and the USS Anchorage, a dock landing ship. [This] exercise involved an amphibious landing, helicopter borne assaults and small boat operations with company strength urban warfare manoeuvres.

It was viewed at that time as support to the new ruler of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad Ibn Khalifa al Thani, who took over the reins of power on 27 June 1995 (Jane’s Defence Weekly 1996).

At the regional level, the GCC’s six states hold frequent joint exercises with the US, in which the Qatari army usually participates. Take, for example, the annual operation ‘Eagle Resolve’ conducted under the US Department of Defense’s Co-operative Defense Initiative (CDI). This operation is a long-term sequence of seminars and exercises designed to enhance a cooperative defence mechanism against weapons of mass destruction and terrorist activity in the region. The first Eagle Resolve, convened in June 1999 in the US, focused on active defence issues. The second, held in May 2000 in Bahrain, dealt with consequence management issues (Jane’s Defence Weekly 2001). Eagle Resolve 2003 focused on methods to improve and better coordinate the delegates’ command, control, communications, computers and intelligence (C4I) capabilities to deter the use of chemical and biological weapons (CBW) by regional adversaries. At the time of the operation of 2004, hosted by the UAE, Iran was depicted as a possible aggressor. Qatar hosted Eagle Resolve 2005, which was

designed to promote and facilitate discussions on topics associated with disaster preparedness and response, and co-operative defense against weapons and incidents of mass destruction. The exercise was also focused on consequence management and demonstrated the effectiveness of a coordinated regional crisis management program. For the Director of this exercise, the Lieutenant Colonel Mike Walton, Eagle Resolve 2005 has been the most comprehensive and engaging ER exercise to date. (Jane’s Defence Weekly 2005)

The operation of 2009 was also hosted by Qatar and focused on communications, chain-of-command issues, crisis management, and air and missile defence (Sun and Zoubir 2015).

The third level of this interaction between American and Qatari armed forces is through the US’s frequent military exercises in the Middle East, of which some are held in Qatar. ‘Eager Lion’ is the largest US-led military exercise in the Middle East, which, in 2012, for instance, brought together some 12,000 military personnel from 19 nations, including Qatar. For CENTCOM, the purpose of this exercise is ‘to strengthen military-to-military relationships of participating partner nations through a joint, whole-of-government, multinational approach, integrating all instruments of national power to meet
current and future complex national security challenges’ (Ripley 2012). Another important event is the International Mine Countermeasures Exercise (IMCMEX), which is the world's largest naval exercise in the Arabian Gulf, with 44 participating nations from six continents. IMCMEX is conducted by US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT)/US 5th Fleet with the focus on Maritime Security Operations, Maritime Infrastructure Protection events and an oil-spill response discussion with industry representatives (US Naval Forces 2014).

All three mechanisms show that the principle driving the US military exercises with Qatar is that of non-discrimination, which means that what is offered to Qatar is offered on the same basis to its other GCC partners, who see themselves as the holders of equal partnership. This is tailored to the specific needs of these countries, the nature of security challenges in this region and the different perceptions of threats. It allowed Qatar to frame its practical cooperation with the US armed forces in a more prospective and focused way. It is also obvious that the issue of training in relation to Qatari-US military relations is primarily multilateral in structure and bilateral on a regular basis.

Qatar’s objectives in conducting these combined military exercises are in harmony with its defence policy which is seeking more familiarization with armed forces of Western countries. It maintains the second-smallest armed force in the GCC with a total of only 12,400 men, plus reserves, and makes no pretence to be a major or a dominated Gulf military power. However, it strives to keep modern equipment and well-trained and motivated personnel with enough capabilities to provide minimal border defence, air and maritime security. So, given that Qatar relies on its international alliances, particularly with the US and through the GCC, to guarantee its security, the joint military exercises and all common training programmes have significant value and are very useful for the Qatari armed forces. In other words, this cooperation has provided valuable lessons for multi-carrier operations covering live-weapon firings, fleet air defence and maritime warfare. Without a doubt, these combined exercises have helped the Qatari army to appraise its hardware capabilities, operational planning and human performance. In terms of self-assessment, the Qatari army can assess its defence preparedness and compare its capabilities with its counterparts across the globe.

In this regard, Cordesman and Al-Rodhan (2006, 5) outline that:

Qatari training and readiness is good for such a small force, but the army is capable of operating largely at the battalion level, with limited combined arms capability and negligible capability for maneuver warfare and combined arms. It also has so many types of major weapons that it presents support and sustainment problems, even when based near its peacetime caserns. The Qatari Army can project small forces and played a small role in the Gulf War. It is, however, incapable of engaging any significant Iranian, Saudi, or other regional land force.

The Qatari Emiri navy has, for over two decades, been an active participant in multinational naval operations and training exercises in the Gulf region, especially those carried out with US (Ripley 2007). This allowed it, for instance, to assess the performance of its sonar (sound navigation and ranging) and to widen its naval operational and procurement links.

Likewise, the Qatar Emiri air force, which procured in March 2014 three Boeing 737 Airborne Warning and Control (AWACS) aircraft (Jennings 2014), were involved in valuable exercises in an AWACS environment. For that reason, this interaction provides opportunities to evaluate potential procurements in a near-combat scenario and to be aware of its pertinence as observed during exercises, which is practical for a country
like Qatar which seeks advanced defence technologies. This stance encouraged US defence enterprises to demonstrate the best performances of their products, which facilitates arms contracts when they make an offer.

Finally, the major positive impact has been to achieve interoperability in Qatar–US combined operations and the ability to work together on a practical basis through training, exercises and combat operations. It seems that the small Qatari army made interoperability with the US a strategic goal in order to operate successfully and enhance its effectiveness.

The US: the main current arms supplier

Qatar arms sales from the US reflect its procurement strategy to build defence capability, but also the impulse to cultivate foreign security protection. The idea behind this is that the purchase of Western modern weapons systems provides prestige in terms of regional balance. It is not only a Qatari approach, but a regional practice in the Gulf to buy influence and protection through the acquisition of Western military material and thereby maintain the minimum level of spending necessary to keep their allies happy.

Qatar has built up its defence capabilities over time to acquire an adequate defence capability adapted to the size of its army and territory. Robert Czulda notes that its procurement policy has evolved many times since the country gained independence in 1971; it has been shaped by the relationships with three major suppliers: the UK, France and the US (Czulda 2014, 35). During the 1970s, Qatar acquired most of its military needs from the UK due to their historical ties before and after the British protectorate. In the early 1980s, France became the first supplier of Qatar, and over a short period of time it provided approximately 80% of Qatar’s arms inventory. The majority of defence contracts, without excluding British contractors, went to French companies within the framework of the new programme of force modernization launched by Qatar following the 1991 Gulf War. This switch over from the UK to France for its defence procurements could be explained by the will of Qatar to develop close relations with France, but it is also a reaction to the US ban on arms sales to Qatar due to what was called the Stinger crisis. In this regards, Blanchard states that:

A US embassy opened in Doha in 1973, but US relations with Qatar did not blossom until after the 1991 Persian Gulf War. In the late 1980s, the United States and Qatar engaged in a prolonged diplomatic dispute regarding Qatar’s black market procurement of US-made Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. The dispute froze planned economic and military cooperation, and Congress approved a ban on arms sales to Qatar (Section 566(d), P.L. 100-461) until the months leading up to the 1991 Gulf War, when Qatar allowed coalition forces to operate from Qatari territory and agreed to destroy the missiles in question. (Blanchard 2010, 12)

Currently, there is a tendency to purchase significant weapons from the US, which has built several military facilities in Qatar. A proposed series of major US arms sales to Qatar has marked a shift since 2010 in Qatar’s defence procurement toward the use of advanced American weapons systems. This has led to the consolidation of military ties since the new weapons necessitate more training by the supplying country as well as technical and logistical support services, which means that more Qatari officers have to live in the US for certain periods, and vice versa.

Qatar’s purchase of US weapons includes in particular air and missile defence systems in which it has become increasingly interested, in line with new trends of defence spending...
in the region. Along with other GCC countries, Qatar is operating to make substantial investments in acquiring and upgrading Patriot and Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) systems from the US. On 14 July 2014, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and his Qatari counterpart, Hamad bin Ali al-Atiyah, signed letters of offers and acceptance to sell defence articles and services to Qatar (US Department of Defense, 2014). The major weapons in the deal include 247 PAC-3 missiles, 117 GEM-T missiles, 24 Apache helicopters and 500 Javelin anti-tank missiles (Global Security n.d.). The major contractors involved include Raytheon, Lockheed Martin and Boeing against British BAE Systems and Dassault Aviation of France. These sales are collectively worth US$11 billion, which was the biggest arms sale deal for the US in 2014. The spokesman of the US Department of Defense, Rear Admiral John Kirby, said that the signing of this deal ‘underscores the strong partnership between the United States and Qatar in the area of security and defence and will help improve our bilateral co-operation across a range of military operations’ (Binnie 2014, 1). This deal also illustrates that since Qatar’s emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, came to power in June 2013 there has been a shift in Qatari military orientation to strengthen military capabilities and professionalization.

In the category of surface-to-surface rocket and missile systems, *Jane’s Defence Weekly* reports that in 2012 Qatar requested from the United States many elements for an estimated cost of US$406 million. This sale comprises:

7 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) launchers with the Universal Fire Control System (UFCS); 60 M57 Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) Block 1A T2 K unitary rockets (60 pods, 1 rocket per pod); and 360 M31A1 Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) unitary rockets (60 pods, 6 rockets per pod). Also included are 180 M28A2 reduced range practice rockets (30 pods, 6 rockets per pod); 7 M68A2 trainers, 1 Advanced Field Artillery Tactical Data System (AFATDS); 2 M1151A1 High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWV); and 2 M1152A2 HMMWVs. (Jennings 2012)

In parallel, sums have been invested in the Qatar Emiri Air Force (QEAF) in recent years to decrease a number of capability gaps and to update ‘the age of some equipment [which] may hamper its ability to perform in high tempo operations’ (IISS 2012, 344). Thus, Qatar has boosted its airlift capabilities with the acquisition in 2009 of two C-17 Globemaster III strategic transport aircraft (*Jane’s Defence Weekly* 2009), which, ‘along with Mirage2000 aircraft, were deployed on operations over Libya to enforce UNSCR 1973’ (IISS 2012, 344) The acquisition of Apache helicopters, along with its fleet of C-17 transport planes, indicates that the QEAF is going to build expeditionary capabilities and play a greater role internationally, such as its airlifted humanitarian relief into Chile, Haiti and Kenya. Furthermore, in 2008 Qatar procured from Lockheed Martin four C-130J Super Hercules aircraft (the US Air Force’s principal tactical cargo and personnel transport aircraft), which were delivered in 2011,12 significantly ‘boosting Qatar’s transport capabilities, making it the first C-130J operator in the Middle East’ (Czulda 2014, 36). *Jane’s Defence Weekly* states that this tendency to prefer US weapons is manifested by Qatari interest in:

Acquiring between 24–36 fighters of Boeing’s F/A-18E/F Super Hornet and F-15 Eagle. In June 2012 the emirate requested 12 Sikorsky UH-60M Black Hawk utility helicopters and 22 MH-60 Seahawk helicopters from the US government in deals estimated to be worth US$ 1.1 billion and USD 2.5 billion respectively. The Seahawk request consists of 10 MH-60R anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare helicopters and 12 MH-60S utility helicopters with modification kits so that they can also carry weapons, with a requested option on
another six MH-60Ss. In May 2013, Boeing revealed it was engaged in discussions with Qatar about the possible supply of CH-47F Chinooks. (Jane’s Defence Weekly 2013, 9–10)

These facts indicate that in recent years the US became the main arms supplier of Qatar. Signed contracts and known procurement plans indicate that the country is likely to become a major importer of US weapons. The volume of arms imported by Qatar from the US has continuously increased, in particular since 2010. Qatar maintains a small army, but its equipment is modern and its forces are well trained.

Finally, the most important thing to note is that this arms sale offers a way of boosting the US economy. According to the US ambassador to Qatar, Dana Shell Smith, the deal of US$11 billion concluded in 2014:

has benefited the American people by sustaining more than 50,000 jobs in the United States, with the potential for 60,000 more. This is just one area where enhanced strategic ties between the United States and Qatar stand to bolster the American economy. (Smith 2015, 21)

Conclusions

The military relationship between the US and Qatar has progressively evolved, driven by the changing geopolitical landscape and shaped by a dynamic of uncertainty and increasingly sophisticated security threats in the Middle East. It reflects the defence posture of each country in this region. For the US, defence cooperation with Qatar is part of its comprehensive policy towards other Gulf countries and its military presence in this region. For Qatar, this partnership confirms that the motivation for bandwagoning is done with the expectation of making gains, particularly in response to external threats and in order to be assured a certain degree of assistance geared to reinforce its limited military capabilities. Interaction with the US army has been useful in terms of improving the readiness and effectiveness of the Qatari military, in particular the air forces.

This partnership rests on four pillars: a bilateral defence agreement, the use of military facilities, arms sales and military-to-military contacts. It is shaped by interconnected needs and interests, thus becoming captive to bilateral relations. It has led Qatar and the US to develop a shared engagement regarding conflict and crisis management in the Middle East, as well as to coordinate their security policies in response to the threat of transnational terrorism. However, despite the mutual reliance that has characterized this relationship since the 1990s, there is no explicit American security guarantee for Qatar. This means that there is no alliance in legal terms.

Notes

1. Also known as the Arab Collective Security Pact (ACSP). Article 2 of the ACSP says that ‘the Contracting States consider any (act of) armed aggression made against any one or more of them or their armed forces, to be directed against them all […]’. It is similar to NATO’s Article 5 about collective defence. However, Arab states never implemented the conditions of this pact.

2. In this regard, Kamrava (2011, 539) notes that: ‘Uniquely for a country of its size, Qatar has emerged as one of the world’s most proactive mediators in recent years. Motivated by a combination of international prestige and survival strategies, the country has sought to position itself as a neutral peacemaker in many of the international and intra-national conflicts brewing across the Middle East region. In three of the most notable cases in which it has
involved itself – Lebanon, Sudan, and Yemen – Qatar has proven itself to be a capable mediator in reducing tensions but not, crucially, in resolving conflicts.‘

3. It is worth remembering that in 1914 Ottoman forces evacuated Qatar. Two years later, in 1916, Britain recognized Sheikh Abdullah Al-Thani as the legitimate ruler of Qatar; the two countries signed a treaty by which Qatar became a British protectorate and undertook not to enter into any relations with any other powers. In 1934, a further treaty was signed with the British, extending this protection in case of aggression against Qatar (Fromherz 2012).

4. ‘There was just one Royal Guards Regiment, some scattered units equipped with a few armoured cars and four aircraft. […] A large armed force was neither feasible nor practical for Qatar, given its size and lack of manpower resources. It, therefore, placed its reliance on small but well equipped mobile forces to deter incursions through land and sea’ (Singh 2005, 387).

5. In September 1992, the disagreement between them about the interpretation of the border demarcation, introduced by a British-brokered 1965 agreement, culminated in violent clashes in the town of al-Khafus (about 80 miles south-east of Doha), killing two Qataris. Qatar reacted by cancelling its participation in the Peninsula Shield Force exercises. During the GCC’s Muscat summit in December 1995, the Qatari delegation withdrew from it, protesting about the Saudi rejection of its candidate for the position of Secretary General of the GCC. When Sheikh Hamad came to power in 1995, he initiated an independent foreign policy and sought to transform Qatar into a regional power, which led to the irritation and resentment of Saudi Arabia. In the same year, the Qatari government alleged that Saudi Arabia was fomenting a coup in Qatar. The Qatari television station was also a serious source of deterioration in its relations. Disagreements were manifested in many regional issues before and after the Arab Spring, which had a negative impact on the coherence of the GCC. Qatar described the comment of the former head of the Saudi intelligence agency, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, as ‘insulting’ when he declared, in August 2013, that Qatar is ‘nothing but 300 people and a TV channel’. For more details about the history of Qatari-Saudi relations, see Cordesman (2003).

6. On 25 June 1996, a truck bombing outside a military housing compound in Dhahran killed 19 members of US armed forces and wounded hundreds of others. The presence of US military bases in Saudi Arabia, the land of Islam’s two holiest shrines, were among the reasons given by Osama bin Laden to threat and target American interests throughout the world. Within days, this presence was being questioned because it represented one of the leading sources of radicalization against the United States. In addition, the Saudi government realized that using the base to support an attack against another Muslim country in the region would exacerbate internal instability and further offend conservative religious groups, which object to any kind of foreign military presence on Muslim holy land.

7. The CDI was established by US Central Command (USCENTCOM) in 1999 to enhance the interoperability of the armed forces of the US’s allies in the Middle East. It comprises a series of bilateral arrangements between the US army and each participating nation.

8. Bahrain, with an estimated 11,000 member force, has the smallest.

9. Qatar Law No. 5 of 2014 introduced mandatory military service for male Qataris between the ages of 18 and 35 years. They are now required to train with the country’s armed forces for three to four months (Khatri 2014).

10. The tank battalion and the mechanized infantry battalion were equipped with French-made AMX-30 main battle tanks and AMX-10P armoured personnel carriers (APCs) respectively. The artillery regiment also had French-made 155 mm self-propelled howitzers. The principal anti-tank weapons were French Milan and HOT wire guided missiles. Three French-built La Combattante III missile boats were acquired in 1983 and formed the core of the Navy. The boats supplemented the Vosper Thornycroft large patrol boats. Its fighter aircraft included Alpha Jets and Mirage F1s, all purchased from France’ (Singh 2005, 387).

11. Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment states that: ‘The conclusion of a defense agreement with the UK in April 1996 opened the way for major purchases from British contractors, involving the supply of Piranha APCs and “Vita” class patrol craft. The UK company Vickers has been seen as a major contender to supply up to 40 Challenger 2 main battle tanks (MBTs) as
the replacement for Qatar’s ageing AMX-30S MBTs’ (Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment 2015, 2).


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