

Qatari Foreign Policy and the Exercise of Subtle Power

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Abstract

Small states are generally assumed to be on the receiving end of power in the international arena rather than a source of it. But from the late 1990s up until mid-2013, **Emir Hamad Al-Thani** ruled the country, Qatar became endowed with a form of power. This form of power did not conform to traditional conceptions of “soft,” “hard,” or “smart” power but was a composite form of power that could be best described as “subtle power”. Qatari foreign policy at the time was comprised of four primary components. These included hedging, military security and protection, branding and hyperactive diplomacy, and international investments. Combined, these four foreign policy components bestowed Qatar with a level of power and influence that was far beyond its status as a small state and a newcomer to regional and global politics. This type of power was neither rooted in the attraction of norms (soft power) nor in military ability (hard power). It instead consisted of a form of often behind-the-scenes agenda setting that could be best described as subtle power.

Keywords: International Relations, Regional Studies, Qatar, Foreign Policy, Persian Gulf, Middle East, Al-Thani.

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Conceptions of international relations have traditionally revolved around the importance, and therefore the powers, of the great powers. The story of international relations has been one of great powers and of their rivalries and power machinations.¹ Scholars of international politics have long seen power as the preserve of the big. Size, when it comes to the conduct of interstate relations, matters. Kenneth Waltz has been one of the most notable proponents of this line of thinking. “The theory, like the story, of international politics,” he writes, “is written in terms of the great powers of an era.”² Interactions among the major states are far more likely to be consequential for the larger international system than among the minor ones. In fact, he maintains, “a general theory of international politics is necessarily based on the great powers.”³

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1. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 5.

2. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 1979), p. 72.

3. Ibid. p. 73.

At least insofar as the distribution of power in the Middle East and North African subsystem is concerned, there has been a steady shift in the influence of the Persian Gulf in general and the position and powers of Qatar in particular. This paper examines the broad parameters of Qatar's position in the international system in the latter years of the rule of the country's former emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani (r. 1995-2013), looking specifically at its sources of what may be called "subtle power".

The paper begins with a discussion of the typical roles, profile, and position of small states in the international system. For the most part correctly, international relations scholars have situated small states on the receiving end of power rather than as influencers and, much less, as sources of power. For about a decade, Qatar, a small state by any definition, bucked the trend. This paper explains the paradox that is Qatar's outsized role and position in the international system.

I argue that traditional conceptions of power no longer adequately describe emerging trends shaping the international system. Realist and neorealist thinkers have viewed power in terms of access to and control over tangible resources, especially manpower and military strength. More recently, notions of first soft power and then smart power have sought to rectify seemingly narrow and increasingly unfeasible focus of realists on force and military hardware. None of these conceptions, I argue, adequately describe the underlying dynamics that account for the position that Qatar—an otherwise small state on the margins of global power politics—was able to carve out for itself.

That Qatar was able to create a distinct niche for itself on the global arena, that it played on a stage significantly bigger than its stature and size warranted, that it emerged as a consequential player not just in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula but indeed across the Middle East and beyond, all bespeak of its possession of a certain type and amount of power. This paper explores what that power is. By definition, it cannot be hard or soft power, or their combination of smart power. It is a type of power, the paper maintains, that may be best viewed as "subtle power".

Subtle power is a composite form of power that combines three classical forms of power. First, power revolves around the *exercise of influence*. In simplest terms, A has power over B when it can get B to

do something that B would not otherwise do.¹ Second, power it is the ability to *create conditions* favorable to one's goals. More specifically, as formulated by Steven Lukes, "power is a capacity not the exercise of that capacity (it may never be, and never needed to be, exercised); and you can be powerful by satisfying and advancing others' interests."² Related to this is a third form of power, namely that derived from *mobilization of bias* designed to shape perceptions of a target. In Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz's classic formulation, power is exercised "when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A."³

No form of power lasts forever, and subtle power is not exception. From the late 1990s to 2013, during the reign of Sheik Hamad, Qatar positioned itself to actively exert and benefit from subtle power. When Hamad retired and stepped down from power in June 2013, his son and successor, Sheikh Tamim, began pursuing a deliberately different foreign policy strategy that both reoriented his country's international relations and slowly put an end to its subtle power.

Small States in World Politics

International relations literature has generally treated small states as peripheral actors in international politics, seeing them often in need of protection from more powerful patrons and forced to adopt various accommodative strategies toward both stronger neighbors and international actors.⁴ Thus relegated to the shadows of greater powers, small states are generally assumed to be at best of secondary importance in international power politics and lacking the necessary means and resources that affect the circumstances in which they find

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1. Robert A Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 2, No. 3, (July 1957), pp. 202-203.
 2. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 12.
 3. Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, "Two Faces of Power," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 56, No. 4, (December 1962), p. 948.
 4. Miriam Fendius Elman, "The Foreign Policies of Small States: Challenging Neorealism in Its Own Backyard," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 25, No. 2, (April 1995), p. 175.

themselves.¹ More recently, attention has focused on not just the small states' vulnerability, which is a structural condition, but also on their resilience, which is a product of agency and strategy.² Given the right circumstances, however, small states can actually go beyond simple resilience—i. e. dealing with adversities and the limitations that size and demography impose on them. In fact, they can exert the type of influence that Dahl articulated and become highly influential both regionally and in the larger global arena, to the point of exerting significant amounts of power in their immediate neighborhood and beyond.

This was indeed the case with Qatar, which has emerged as a major player in the Persian Gulf and Middle East subregions, despite a preponderance there of much larger and more powerful actors. In Qatar's case, four factors combined to facilitate this emergence as an influential regional and international player. They included a highly calibrated and carefully maintained policy of hedging; an equally aggressive global campaign of branding; significant capacity on the part of the state; and prudent use of the country's comparative advantage in relation to neighbors near and far. Combined, these initiatives created the right kinds of conditions—in Lukes's formulation—that enabled Qatar to push its agendas forward.

When it comes to regional and international diplomacy, throughout the late 1990s and the 2000s Qatar's foreign policy appeared to be at best an incongruent reflection of the idiosyncrasies of its chief architects—namely the country's Emir and the prime minister—and at worst inconsistent and maverick. On the surface, Qatar appeared to be consistently “punch above its weight”.³ Especially for a small state located in one of the world's toughest neighborhoods, Qatar's foreign policy appeared woefully out of step with the size of the country, the preponderance of “great” and “secondary” powers vying for regional

1. Anthony Payne, “Small States in the Global Politics of Development,” *Round Table*, Vol. 93, No. 376, (2004), p. 634.

2. Two essays, both in the same volume, best represent this trend: Andrew F. Cooper and Timothy W. Shaw, “The Diplomacies of Small States at the Start of the Twenty-first Century: How Vulnerable? How Resilient?” and, Anthony Payne, “Vulnerability as a Condition, Resilience as a Strategy,” in *The Diplomacies of Small States: Between Vulnerability and Resilience*, Andrew F. Cooper and Timothy W. Shaw, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1-18 and 279-285 respectively.

3. Neil Ford, “Qatar Punches above its Weight,” *The Middle East*, (March 2004), pp. 49-54.

influence and position—most notably the United States and Iran—and the conventional power capabilities at its disposal.¹ Nevertheless, on closer examination Qatar’s foreign policy pursuits were actually quite logical, a product of the country’s successful, and in some ways fortuitous, positioning of itself as a small but highly influential actor in fostering regional peace and stability in a neighborhood that is justifiably renowned for its instability. Again, they led to the creation of favorable regional and international conditions within which Qatar could operate.

With Qatar as its focal reference point, this paper posits two central theses. First, the paper maintains that small states can indeed become influential players in the international arena, and, although they may be in need of military protection from others, they can use foreign policy strategies such as “hedging” to greatly strengthen their leverage vis-à-vis potential foes and friends alike. Although constrained by a number of structural weaknesses and vulnerabilities, small states can use their “individual actor-ness” not only to overcome vulnerabilities and demonstrate resilience, but, in fact, they can become regionally and internationally important players.²

Second, the paper points to the need to rethink and refine existing conceptions of power, with traditional assumptions about power as rooted in military strength or cultural values—i.e. hard and soft power respectively—no longer adequately describing the nature of Qatar’s position in the Persian Gulf and in the larger Middle East. During the period under study, Qatar’s influence and power were neither military nor cultural—nor a combination of the two, so-called “smart power”³—but were derived from a carefully combined mixture of marketing, domestic politics, regional diplomacy, and, through strategic use of its sovereign wealth fund, increasing access to and ownership over prized commercial resources. This bespeaks of a new form of power and influence, one that is more subtle in its

1. Robert Keohane, “The Big Influence of Small Allies,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 2, (Spring 1971), pp. 162-163.

2. Cooper and Shaw, “The Diplomacies of Small States at the Start of the Twenty-first Century,” p. 4.

3. Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “How America Can become a Smarter Power,” in *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America*, Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye, eds. (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007), p. 7.

manifestations and is less blunt and blatant, one which may more aptly be described as subtle power.

I begin with a brief examination of the role and position of small states in world politics, and the policy options they tend to adopt in order to adjust to international circumstance and to protect and further their interests in the international arena.¹ Despite serious disadvantages in military and diplomatic power, small states resort to one or more of three options—alliances, norm entrepreneurship, and hedging—in order to enhance their position and leverage in the international arena. The strategy of hedging is sustained, I maintain, by the steady rise of Qatar’s self-confidence both regionally and globally.

Small states do indeed face a number of both political as well as economic disadvantages in the international arena. Economically, they have to contend with a number of inherent vulnerabilities and deficiencies, such as inadequate or insufficient resources, limited opportunities for diversification, trade dependence, limited institutional capacity in the public and private sectors, comparatively high costs for services and transportation, and exposure to environmental and other

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1. Despite a number of groundbreaking works on the topic, the definition of a small state remains essentially contested. See, for example, Jeanne A. K. Hey, “Introducing Small State Foreign Policy,” in *Small States in World Politics: Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior*, Jeanne A. K. Hey, ed. (Boulder, CO: 2003) pp. 2-4; Christos Kassimeris, “The Foreign Policy of Small Powers,” *International Politics*, Vol. 46, No. 1, (2009), pp. 88-89; Matthias Maas, “The Elusive Definition of the Small States,” *International Politics*, Vol. 46, No. 1, (2009), pp. 65-83; Iver B. Neumann and Sieglinde Gstohl, “Introduction: Liliputians in Gulliver’s World?” in *Small States in International Relations*, Christine Ingebritsen, Iver Neumann, Sieglinde Gstohl, and Jessica Beyer, eds. (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp. 4-7; and, Payne, “Small States in the Global Politics of Development,” p. 626, among others. Much of the difference in the conception of small state can be traced to the criterion used to measure smallness—i.e. geographic and/or population size, leaders’ perceptions, etc. Sutton goes so far as to say that it is difficult to classify small states as a “distinct category” and instead “we are dealing with degrees, not kind.” Paul Sutton, “What are the Priorities for Small States in the International System?” *Round Table*, No. 351, (1999), p. 399. In specific relation to Qatar, the country is small regardless of the yardstick against which it is measured. The country’s total population numbers approximately 1.6 million, of whom only about fifteen percent are citizens, with the rest tightly controlled and segregated. The country’s landmass, meanwhile, measures only 11,500 sq. km., as compared to the neighboring states of Saudi Arabia (approximately 2,000,000 sq. km.), the United Arab Emirates (77,700 sq. km.), and Iran (1,640,000 sq. km.), with only Bahrain being smaller (691 sq. km.).

exogenous shocks.¹ The political and diplomatic disadvantages that small states face in the international arena tend to be just as restrictive. The position and role of small states in the international arena are often at best reactive, vulnerable to outside events, and naturally contingent on the priorities and postures of the great powers, on whom the small and the weak rely for security and protection.²

All of this is not to imply that small states are hapless recipients of power and influence by the stronger actors in the international arena. In fact, small states have been able to enhance their leverage and influence both within the community of greater powers and between them, using one or more of three options, namely through forging alliances, mustering up issue-specific power, and a delicate balancing-act commonly referred to as “hedging”. In other words, they can both exert influence in direct or indirect ways (in Dahl’s formulation) and also create conditions that facilitate their pursuits of interests (in Luke’s formulation).

One of the more prevalent, as well as effective, ways in which small states compensate for their lack of power and influence in the international arena is through entering formal or informal alliances with more powerful patrons. According to Walt, states join alliances in response to threats and not necessarily out of ideological affinity or because of “bribery” (aid, development assistance, etc.), the latter two tending to strengthen existing alliances rather than creating them.³ For small states, alliances with a greater power may be informal or may take the form of signing of a formal treaty of protection from outside

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1. Christopher Easter, “Small States Development: A Commonwealth Vulnerability Index,” *Round Table*, No. 351, (1999), pp. 403-422; Anthony Payne, “Small States in the Global Politics of Development,” *Round Table*, Vol. 93, No. 376, (2004), pp. 623-635; Barbara Von Tiggerstrom, “Small Island Developing States and International Trade: Special Challenges in the Global Partnership for Development,” *Melbourne Journal of International Law*, Vol. 6, (2005), pp. 402-407; Ganesh Wignaraja, Marlon Lezama and David Joiner, *Small States Transition from Vulnerability to Competitiveness*, (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2004), p. 4; and, World Bank, *Small States: Making the Most of Development Assistance*, (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006), pp. 2-3.
 2. Christos Kassimeris, “The Foreign Policy of Small Powers,” *International Politics*, Vol. 46, No. 1, (2009), p. 90.
 3. Stephen Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4, (1985), p. 33.

threats.¹ Besides providing protection, alliances serve as enabling mechanisms for small states in a number of important ways.

To begin with, small states that bandwagon or enter into formal alliances often do so through a delicate series of bargains that enhance their leverage vis-à-vis the great power protector. These bargains may entail one or more combinations of formal negotiations, or they may involve influencing domestic opinion and private interest groups through lobbying efforts.² Moreover, alliances enable small states “not only to enhance their military security but also to obtain a variety of non-military benefits, such as increased trade or support for domestic political regimes”.³ Equally important are the benefits of membership in multi-state alliances and institutions, the most notable being the European Union (and the European Commission in particular) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), whose policy- and decision-making structures tend to be biased in favor of small states and in which small states tend to be over-represented.⁴ In the United Nations, small states often “intervene to provide a basis for compromise on divisive issues”.⁵

Alliances, of course, do not come without costs, inhering potentially glaring contradictions between influence on the one hand

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1. Heinz Gartner defines alliances as “formal associations of states bound by mutual commitment to use military force against non-member states to defend member states’ integrity.” [Heinz Gartner, “Small States and Alliances,” in *Small States and Alliances*, Erich Reiter and Heinz Gartner, eds. (New York: Physica-Verlag, 2001), p. 2.] My usage of “alliance” here is less restrictive in that it may involve a formal security pact or, alternatively, a less formalized but no less solid arrangement or understanding whereby the small state endorses the general policy objective of the great power in exchange for overall support in international relations, as well as guarantees of security and protection against outside threats.
 2. Robert O. Keohane, “The Big Influence of Small Allies,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 2, (1971), p. 166.
 3. Gartner, “Small States and Alliances,” p. 3.
 4. Charles-Michel Geurts, “The European Commission: A Natural Ally of Small States in the EU Institutional Framework?” in *Small States Inside and Outside the European Union*, Laurent Goetschel, ed. (London: Kluwer, 1998), pp. 49-64; Antti Kuosmanen, “Decision-Making in the Council of the European Union,” in *Small States Inside and Outside the European Union*, Laurent Goetschel, ed. (London: Kluwer, 1998), pp. 65-78.
 5. Mark Hong, “Small States in the United Nations,” *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 2, (1995), p. 278.

and autonomy on the other.¹ Small states especially risk losing policy autonomy or flexibility in the face of international crises involving the more powerful patron.² “In their more benign forms,” according to one observer, the trade-offs between sovereignty and protection are “negotiated and transparent”.³ They can, however, take the form of “less opaque infringements on sovereignty.” There are also the risks of “entrapment” and “abandonment” for small states that enter into alliance with a larger power, with the former arising when a strong dependence on the alliance locks the small state’s policy options to those of the stronger ally even if they are harmful to the small state’s interests, and the latter becoming a possibility when alliance ties are too loose and the pluses of breaking them outweigh the costs of maintaining them.⁴

Apart from using alliance politics and other systemic factors to their advantage—e.g. the structure of the international system (hierarchical, hegemonical, or balance of power), or the state of the international system (in terms of degree of tension)—small powers may also resort to international norms, as well as their own agency and actions, in order to enhance their influence in international politics.⁵ In particular, through persistent activism in and unrelenting attention to specific issues, some small states have been able to emerge as important norm entrepreneurs on the international stage. According to Kingdon, when it comes to agenda-setting, a policy entrepreneur is more likely to be taken seriously if it is recognized as an expert on the policy issue in question.⁶ Not surprisingly, a number

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1. Laurent Goetschel, “The Foreign and Security Policy Interests of Small States in Today’s Europe,” in *Small States Inside and Outside the European Union*, Laurent Goetschel, ed. (London: Kluwer, 1998), p. 17. For a full treatment of alliance behavior see Glenn Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 4, (1984), pp. 461-495.
 2. Volker Kraus and J. David Singer, “Minor Powers, Alliances, and Armed Conflict: Some Preliminary Patterns,” in *Small States and Alliances*, Erich Reiter and Heinz Gartner, eds. (New York: Physica-Verlag, 2001), p. 19.
 3. Svend Aage Christensen, “The Danish Experience—Denmark in NATO, 1949-1999,” in *Small States and Alliances*, Erich Reiter and Heinz Gartner, eds. (New York: Physica-Verlag, 2001), p. 93.
 4. Gartner, “Small States and Alliances,” p. 2.
 5. Neumann and Gstohl, “Introduction: Liliputians in Gulliver’s World?” p. 11.
 6. J. W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policy*, (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1984), p. 189.

of small (European) states have developed reputations as “forerunners” and “role models” on certain norms and issues, thus exerting disproportionate influence in the relevant policy areas: Sweden on environmental issues; Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands on issues related to gender; and Belgium and the Netherlands on monetary and economic union.¹ Needless to say, for small states aspiring to become policy entrepreneurs, the likelihood of success is enhanced if they are seen as impartial and honest brokers interested in the greater good.² Having sufficient financial and/or human resources to support a particular initiative can only be a plus. Undoubtedly, there are a number of states that are “small and weak”. There are, however, also states that are “small and influential,” of which Israel, the Nordic countries, and Singapore are prime examples.³ Qatar, this paper maintains, also belongs in this category.

In addition to alliances and issue-specialization, small states tend to rely on “hedging” as a strategy to enhance their position in the international system. Hedging may be defined as “a behavior in which a country seeks to offset risks by pursuing multiple policy options that are intended to produce mutually counteracting effects, under the situation of high-uncertainties and high-stakes”.⁴ Hedging stresses engagement and integration mechanisms on the one hand, and realist-style balancing and external security cooperation on the other.⁵ An “insurance policy” of sorts, hedging can be seen as “a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide on more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality”.⁶ As such, hedging is “a luxury of the weak only” and prompts weaker states to adopt a middle line of engagement and indirect balancing. This is not to imply that hedging means lack of a clear commitment as to where one’s security

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1. Peter Viggo Jakobsen, “Small States, Big Influence: The Overlooked Nordic Influence on the Civilian ESDP,” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 1, (2009), pp. 86-87.
 2. Jakobsen, “Small States, Big Influence,” p. 87.
 3. Hong, “Small States in the United Nations,” p. 279.
 4. Kuik Cheng-Chwee, “The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore’s Response to Rising China,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (2008), p. 163.
 5. Evan Medeiros, “Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia-Pacific Security,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 1, (2005-06), p. 145.
 6. Evelyn Goh, *Meeting the China Challenge: The US in Southeast Asian Regional Security Challenge*, Policy Studies 16. (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2005), p. viii.

and interests lie. It is a carefully calibrated policy in which the state takes big bets one way—for example, in Qatar’s case opting for the American security umbrella—while it also takes smaller bets the other way—as in maintaining friendly ties with Iran and regional Islamists.

Generally, if a state faces an unequivocal threat from an actor, it is likely to pursue a balancing strategy in relation to that actor. Alternatively, if the state views an actor as a principal source of profit, then it is likely to bandwagon with it.¹ More often, however, smaller states face risks that are “multifaceted and uncertain”.² At the same time, small states often find that their relations with the major powers need to be deliberate and studied: too close of an alliance could mean losing their independence and inviting unwanted interference, whereas too distant of a relationship can put them “in an unfavorable position if the Great Power gains pre-eminence in the future”.³ Small states, therefore, are likely to engage in hedging by pursuing simultaneous strategies of return-maximizing on the one hand and risk contingency on the other. In order to maximize their returns vis-à-vis a great power, they pursue economic pragmatism, limited bandwagoning, and binding engagements (in the form of formal treaties), all the meanwhile careful, through dominance-denial and limited balancing, to reduce their risk exposure if things go awry.⁴ All too often, dominance-denial and limited balancing take the form of maintaining relations with the Great Power’s adversaries and competitors, at times as perfunctorily as simply keeping lines of communication open, and at other times in the form of warm and cordial ties. Whatever form these endeavors may take, their ultimate outcome is a deliberately crafted, highly active diplomatic profile on the part of the small state

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1. Balancing and bandwagoning need not be viewed as opposites. Walt sees both strategies as responses to threats as “states will ally with or against the most *threatening* power” (“Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” 8-9; original emphasis). Schweller agrees, to a point. “The aim of balancing,” he argues, “is self-preservation and the protection of values already possessed, while the goal of bandwagoning is usually self-extension: to obtain values coveted. Simply put, balancing is driven by the desire to avoid losses; bandwagoning by the opportunity for gain.” He also goes on to argue, however, that “the presence of a significant external threat, while required for effective balancing, is unnecessary for states to bandwagon.” Randall Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1, (1994), p. 74.
 2. Cheng-Chwee, “The Essence of Hedging,” p. 164.
 3. *Ibid.* pp. 164-5.
 4. *Ibid.* p. 171.

which, on the surface at least, may seem incongruent with its position in the international system.

Varieties of Power

Power is an essentially contested concept.¹ One of the most enduring definitions of power was offered by Robert Dahl back in 1957, who defined power as the ability to control the behavior of others, or, more specifically, to get others to do what they would not otherwise do on their own.² Power does not necessarily mean control, but does bring with it greater autonomy, permits a wider range of actions, “a wider margin of safety in dealing with the less powerful”, and a bigger stake in the system and “the ability to act for its sake.”³ Power and persuasion have a close, interconnected relationship. If we take *power* to mean the ability to get others to do what they would not do otherwise, *influence* is to do so through persuasion.⁴ A similar definition is offered by Michael Barnett and Raymond Duval, though for them power is the capacity to determine one’s own existence. They maintain that power is “the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate.”⁵

Whether it presents itself through coercion or persuasion, or directed at controlling others or at asserting the self, for realist thinkers power revolves around material capabilities rather than influence or outcome. For Waltz, state power is derived from a combination of tangible resources: “the size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence.”⁶ Others have similarly defined power in terms of population, economic productivity, and relative political capacity.⁷ Writing at the turn of the new century, a group of

1. Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), p. 5.

2. Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” pp. 202-203.

3. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 194-195.

4. Henry R. Nau, *Perspectives on International Relations: Power, Institutions, and Ideas*, (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2007), p. 22.

5. Barnett and Duvall, “Power in International Politics,” p. 42.

6. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 131.

7. Tammen, et al. *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century*, (New York: Chatham House, 2000), pp. 15, 44.

scholars saw population as the key ingredient of power. “Population is the sine qua non for greater power status,” they wrote. “The size of populations ultimately determines the power potential of nations. Population is the element that determines in the long run which nations will remain major powers.”¹

John Mearsheimer similarly sees power as the product of two main resources, namely a sizeable population, and high levels of wealth, both of which enable a country to construct a formidable military. States with small populations cannot be great powers. Power represents “nothing more than specific assets or material resources that are available to a state.”² For Mearsheimer, as for most other realists, power is the very essence of international politics, the very prize over which states compete with one another. States, he maintains, seek power not just to maintain the international status quo, but for the purposes of dominating other states.³ Accordingly, states focus on each other’s capabilities rather than on intentions.⁴ Wealth is important, but only insofar as it enables states to maintain an effective military force. Wealth underpins military power, and wealth by itself is a good indicator of latent power. There are two kinds of power: latent power, and military power. Latent power “refers to the socio-economic ingredients that go into building military power; it is largely based on a state’s wealth and the overall size of its population.”⁵ In international politics, a state’s effective power is ultimately a function of its military forces and how they compare with the military forces of rivals. More specifically, it is the size of land forces that matter. According to Mearsheimer, power needs to be defined “largely in military terms because ... force is the *ultima ratio* of international politics.”⁶

Along similar lines, Paul Kennedy points to the importance of resources as the basis of national power. Economics is an important ingredient of power, Kennedy maintains. But it is one of its ingredients, others being factors such as geography, military

1. Tammen, et al. *Power Transitions*, p. 18.

2. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 43.

3. Ibid. p. 21.

4. Ibid. p. 45.

5. Ibid. p. 55.

6. Ibid. p. 56.

organization, national morale, the alliance system, and many other factors that affect a state's powers relative to others. He argues that there is "a significant correlation *over the longer* term between productive and revenue-raising capacities on the one hand and military strength on the other."¹ Robust productivity and military strength combine to result in power. Technological and economic changes, which are inescapable features of human history, bring about shifts in levels of national and international power. Major shifts in military power balances have been followed by alterations in the productive balances, as confirmed by outcomes of major wars between the great powers.² States need to provide three essential tasks, namely providing for military security, meeting economic needs and demands, and ensuring sustained growth. To achieve great power status, they have to strike a rough balance between the three competing demands of defense, consumption, and investment.³ Power necessitates balanced focus on both the economic as well as military facets of power. Excessive focus on military strength and security runs the risk of neglecting and burdening economic strength, thus leading to decline. Spending on unproductive armaments takes away from productive investments, leading over time to an erosion of power.⁴

Robert Keohane similarly links wealth and power.⁵ Keohane defines power in terms of control over such key resources as raw materials, markets, and sources of capital, as well as competitive advantage in the production of highly valued goods. Access to crucial raw materials, control over major sources of capital, maintaining a large market for imports, and holding competitive advantage in goods with high value added that yield relatively high wages and profits are all key elements of power.⁶ For Keohane, exclusive access to these resources adds up to the making of a "hegemonic power."⁷ But in the real world such access is hardly exclusive, enjoyed by many—but by no means all—resource-rich countries that have positioned themselves appropriately in the international system.

1. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. xxiv.

2. *Ibid.* pp. 439-440.

3. *Ibid.* p. 446.

4. *Ibid.* p. 539.

5. Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 18.

6. *Ibid.* pp. 32-34.

7. *Ibid.* p. 40.

Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power", initially introduced in 1990, altered our understanding of power in a number of respects. Whereas the resources associated with hard power are tangible—such as force and money—the resources of soft power are intangible, most notably institutions, ideas, values, culture, and perceived legitimacy of culture.¹ Soft power shapes the preferences of others. It involves "getting others to want the outcome that you want" and "co-opts people rather than coerces them."² Soft power is more than just influence or persuasion; it is also the power of attraction—"an intangible attraction that persuades us to go along with others' purposes without any explicit threat or exchange taking place."³ Power does not always have to be deliberate in nature and in its exercise. There is also a "structural" aspect to power, which is to get the desired outcome without resorting to bribes or threats.⁴ In international politics, soft power is produced from three primary sources: values expressed in a nation's culture, examples set by internal practices and policies, and the way a nation handles its relations with others.⁵

Nye argues that power should not be seen so much in terms of resources but instead should be viewed in terms of influencing and getting desired outcomes. States endowed with resources that are traditionally seen as sources of power do not always get their desired outcomes.⁶ Transforming resources into sources of power requires well-designed strategies and skillful leadership. What is important is how resources are turned into outcomes based on strategies and context. "Power conversion" is the capacity to transform potential power into actual power.⁷ Some countries are far more effective at converting potential power into actual power.⁸

Power resources are never static and differ based on different historical contexts. Over the last five hundred years, each century has

1. Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. 21.

2. Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. 5.

3. *Ibid.* p. 7.

4. *Ibid.* p. 15.

5. *Ibid.* p. 8.

6. Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. 8.

7. Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, (New York: Basic Books, 1990), p. 27.

8. *Ibid.* p. 198.

featured a different source of power, often held by a different country. In the eighteenth century, conceptions of power revolved around population size and control over minerals and metals, all of which provided favorable conditions for the Industrial Revolution.¹ In today's world, the main indices of economic power are information and professional and technical services. In the twenty-first century, new notions of security are coming to the fore, revolving not just around survival but also economic welfare, group autonomy, and political status. In today's information age, "it may be the state (or nonstate) with the best story that wins."² New circumstances call for new power resources, such as the capacity for effective communication and for developing and using multilateral institutions. Although force remains a viable and necessary form of power in the anarchic, self-help international system, today new instruments of power such as communications, organizational and institutional skills, and "manipulation of interdependence" are just as critical and important.³ Therefore, any attempt to devise a single index of power is doomed to fail.⁴

More importantly, Nye argued, an important source of power is agenda-setting and determining the framework in which preferences and decisions are formulated.⁵ There are three aspects or faces of power: commanding change, controlling agendas, and establishing preferences.⁶ Power may be indirect and co-optive, resting "on the attraction of one's ideas or on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences that others express."⁷ International institutions set agendas and define issue areas, thus setting rules of conduct in interdependent relationships among states. States try to use these international institutions to shape the overall agenda and set the norms of interstate conduct in relation to specific issues.⁸

The transformation of the nature of power is taking place alongside with its diffusion. To begin with, by nature soft power is diffuse and

1. Ibid. p. 7.

2. Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. xiii.

3. Nye, *Bound to Lead*, p. 187.

4. Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. 5.

5. Nye, *Bound to Lead*, p. 32.

6. Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. 10.

7. Nye, *Bound to Lead*, p. 31.

8. Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. 61.

has an impact on the general goals of a country and is not focused and targeted in nature, and depends also on the receiver and interpreter.¹ At the same time, this diffusion is being reinforced by the development of five broader trends. They include economic interdependence, transnational actors, nationalism in weak states, and changing political issues.² The spread of information technology is making power even more diffuse. Through making information more accessible and affordable, revolutions in information technology are changing the nature of power and increasing its diffusion.³

Nye argues that in today's world it is becoming increasingly less feasible to use military power because of the impracticality of nuclear weapons, rise of communications technology and nationalism, and the growing concern of post-industrial democracies with welfare rather than military glory.⁴ Nevertheless, despite the increasing costs of military conflict, and the dangers of nuclear escalation, military power is likely to continue to play an important role in international politics.⁵ The spread and importance of soft power does not mean a complete obsolescence of force and military power in international politics.

A few years after introducing the notion of soft power Nye introduced the concept of "smart power", which he maintained is "the combination of the hard power of coercion and payment with the soft power of persuasion and attraction."⁶ In simplest terms, smart power is the ability to combine soft and hard power resources into effective strategies.⁷ A smart power strategy provides answers to five key

1. Nye, *Soft Power*, p. 16.

2. Nye, *Bound to Lead*, p. 182.

3. Nye, *The Future of Power*, pp. 114-115. The concept of soft power is not without its critics. Colin Gray, for example, maintains that there are "serious limitations" to the concept since "it utterly depends upon the uncoerced choices of foreigners." Colin S. Gray, *Hard Power and Soft Power: The Utility of Military Force as an Instrument of Policy in the 21st Century*, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), p. viii. Gray goes on to maintain that soft power is "a historically imprecise concept" and "potentially a dangerous idea". pp. 28-29.

4. Nye, *Soft Power*, pp. 18-19.

5. Nye, *Bound to Lead*, pp. 30-31.

6. Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. xiii.

7. *Ibid.* pp. 22-23. There is a complex relationship between soft and hard power, with some hard power resources increasing the effectiveness of soft power, and vice versa. See, Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations*, p. 33. Also, as Nye points out, "no country likes to feel manipulated, even by soft power. At the same time, ... hard power can create myths of invincibility or inevitability that attract others." Nye, *Soft Power*, p. 25.

questions: 1) What goals or outcomes are preferred? 2) What resources are available and in which contexts? 3) What are the positions and preferences of the targets of influence attempts? 4) Which forms of power behavior are most likely to succeed? And, 5) what is the probability of success?¹ Small states, Nye maintains—especially Singapore, Switzerland, Norway, and Qatar—are often particularly adept at employing smart power strategies.²

One of most important elements in “the toolbox of smart power policies” is the effective employment of economic power in a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent. Since it is based on tangible resources, economic power constitutes hard power “in its most direct manifestation” as it can be used to coerce or bribe nations into doing what they would not otherwise do.³ At the same time, however, economic power can also be used as soft power through foreign aid, charity, and investments that endear the donor to the recipients.⁴ More importantly, economic power can be used as leverage in what Nye calls “asymmetries of vulnerability.”⁵ In interdependent relationships, if one party is less dependent than the other one, it has power over the more dependent actor. “Manipulating the asymmetries of interdependence is an important dimension of economic power.”⁶ Economic power is produced through balance of asymmetries. Economic power is highly contingent on the particular context of the market. States, therefore, try to capitalize on asymmetries of interdependence by manipulating economic interactions in areas where they are strong and avoiding those areas in which they are weak.⁷

Nye’s concept of smart power finds close parallels in what Giulio Gallarotti calls “cosmopolitan power.” According to Gallarotti, similar to smart power, cosmopolitan power involves the optimization of

1. Nye, *The Future of Power*, pp. 208-209.

2. Ibid. p. 210.

3. Giulio M. Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations: A Synthesis of Realism, Neoliberalism, and Constructivism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 35.

4. Ibid.

5. Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. 80.

6. Ibid. p. 55.

7. Ibid. pp. 60, 70.

national influence through a combination of hard and soft power.¹ Cosmopolitan power has three “signature processes”, namely soft empowerment (rising influence through increased use of soft power), hard disempowerment (avoiding the self-defeating pitfalls of overreliance on hard power), and combining soft and hard power.² Anarchy continues to be a pervasive feature of the international system, Gallarotti maintains, despite the fact that norms and cooperation can and do function as important instruments of national power.³ The optimization of both absolute and relative power is a legitimate exercise of statecraft, and nations do what they can to optimize their security. This power optimization and security can occur only through a combination of soft and hard power.⁴

Based on the survey just presented, several important threads about the study of power stand out. Given its polymorphous character, we need multiple conceptions of power and a conceptual framework that pays attention to power in its different forms.⁵ Whatever the type of power, the context for its use is quite important.⁶ What is becoming increasingly more important in the contemporary world is “contextual intelligence,” which may be defined as “the ability to understand an evolving environment that capitalizes on trends.”⁷ Due to changes in information technology and the entry of new, often nonconventional actors—such as Al Jazeera, Al Qaeda, and Wikileaks—international politics has become more complex, more volatile, and less contained within national boundaries.⁸ Power has become less coercive and also less tangible. Power resources are becoming less fungible, increasing the importance of context and the actual amount of power that can be derived from various power resources. A capacity for a timely response to new information is an important source of power, as is effective organization skills and flexibility.⁹

1. Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations: A Synthesis of Realism, Neoliberalism, and Constructivism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 5.

2. *Ibid.* pp. 16-17.

3. *Ibid.* p. 268.

4. *Ibid.* pp. 42-48.

5. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, “Power in International Politics,” *International Organizations*, Vol. 59, No. 1, (Winter 2005), pp. 39-40.

6. Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations*, p. 37.

7. Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. xvii.

8. *Ibid.* p. 119.

9. Nye, *Bound to Lead*, p. 196.

But do the different sources and manifestations of power so far analyzed adequately describe the conditions, position, and international profile of a country like Qatar? Any casual observer of Qatar would be hard pressed to ascribe to the country the kinds of power that are described by realists as hard power, in terms of military prowess and population resources, or those alternatively described by more recent theorists as soft or smart—or cosmopolitan—power. Flush with inordinate wealth, it would be easy to think of Qatar as endowed with economic power, and that surely the country has. But there is more to Qatar's international standing and its place and significance within the world community than simple economic power. Whatever economic power may be, Qatar's global profile goes far beyond whatever wealth might accord it. At least insofar as Qatar is concerned—and perhaps for other comparable countries with similar sizes, resources, and global profiles, such as Switzerland and Singapore—a different conceptualization of power may be more apt. Along with a handful of other comparable countries, Qatar may be said to have acquired for itself “subtle power”.

Before examining the key components and the manifestations of subtle power, some of the overall features of power in general bear keeping in mind. First, following insights by Nye and others, power should not be viewed in terms of resources only. In fact, although without resources the exercise of power would be difficult or altogether impossible, power should be seen in terms of the ability to affect outcomes and reach desired objectives. Resources are a necessary but in themselves insufficient component of power. Resources provide *the potential*, not *the manifestations* of power itself. What is important is how resources are marshaled and employed—in Nye's terms “converted” or transformed¹—in a manner that facilitates reaching objectives.

Transforming resources into power involves more than institutional and structural dynamics; it also involves agency. State behavior is strongly conditioned and constrained by the international environment. As Robert Keohane points out, the international behavior of states is the product of a confluence of several factors that are both internal and exogenous to the state. They include the

1. Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. 8.

international distribution of power, distribution of wealth, international regimes, and individual diplomatic initiatives.¹ Equally important in the construction of state behavior, and in determining the nature and tenor of a state's diplomatic initiatives, is the role of agency.² Agency may manifest itself in a variety of ways, including self-esteem and notions of identity and self-perception.³ More specifically, Richard Ned Lebow points to reason, appetite, and what he calls "spirit" as the driving forces of state behavior, with honor and standing as important motivators.⁴ "With standing comes influence, which to some degree is fungible and can be used to enhance security or material well-being."⁵ The international system, Lebow claims, is a site of contestation in which both state and non-state actors claim standing on the basis of diverse criteria. "States invest considerable resources in publicizing and justifying their claims and in making efforts to impress others."⁶

Another feature of power is that it may be as indirect and diffuse as it may be direct and targeted. Barnett and Duval distinguish between four different kinds of power—compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive power—and argue that whereas compulsory and structural varieties of power often manifest themselves in the form of direct control, institutional and productive powers tend to be indirect and diffuse and are mediated through rules, procedures, and outcomes.⁷ The powers of agenda-setting, shaping preferences, and greatly influencing or altogether determining frameworks cannot be

1. Keohane, *After Hegemony*, p. 26.

2. J. Samuel Barkin, *Realist Constructivism: Rethinking International Relations Theory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 102. Barkin defines agency as the "behaviors that individuals purposively choose to undertake ... that are affected but not determined by the structures, social or biological, within which actors find themselves."

3 Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 18-19.

4. Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, pp. 28-29. Lebow argues that spirit and appetite lead to risk-taking while reason leads to caution and restraint. There are, according to Lebow, different patterns of risk acceptance by actors motivated by either fear or honor. An actor motivated by honor and standing tends to be especially risk-accepting with respect to both perceived losses and gains. (p. 31)

5. Ibid. p. 470.

6. Ibid. p. 492.

7. Barnett and Duvall, "Power in International Politics," p. 48.

underemphasized.¹ We should not think of power *over* others but rather power in terms of goals accomplished *with* others.² The ability to get others to do what they would not do otherwise may come through compulsion and force, or bribes and sanctions. But it is just as likely to result from persuasion, commanding respect, manipulating circumstances, or pulling strings from behind the scenes.

Finally, at the risk of stating the obvious, it is worth remembering that different varieties of power often co-exist side by side, and may, in fact, reinforce one another. The lines between compulsion and persuasion are often blurred by a multitude of complexities. A country's vote on a particular issue at the United Nations, for example, may be a product of many complex calculations having to do with the vote's repercussions for its diplomacy, military alliances, and investment potentials and portfolio.³ Countries are persuaded to bandwagon—enter into alliances with a potential adversary—because of the other party's hard power and the potential threat it would pose if the alliance did not exist. Mixed appropriately, hard and soft power result in smart power. Power, in sum, is far from a one-dimensional phenomenon. It can manifest itself in multiple forms simultaneously or at different times.

Insofar as subtle power in specific is concerned, it may best be defined as the ability to exert influence from behind the scenes. It revolves around the ability to influence outcomes to one's advantage through a combination of bringing resources to bear, enjoying international prestige derived from and commensurate with norm-entrepreneurship, and being positioned in a such a way as to manipulate circumstances and the weaknesses of others to one's

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1. Peter van Ham calls this “social power”, which he defines “as the ability to set standards, and create norms and values that are deemed legitimate and desirable, without resorting to coercion or payment. ... (It) involves discursive power, drawing attention to the impact of framing, norm-advocacy, agenda-setting, the impact of media and communications, as well as lesser-known practices like place branding and public diplomacy.” Peter van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics*, (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 8.
 2. Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. xvii.
 3. See, Hanna Newcombe, Michael Ross, and Alan G. Newcombe, “United Nations Voting Patterns,” *International Organization*, Vol. 24, No. 1, (Winter 1970), pp. 100-121, especially, pp. 102-110.

advantage.¹ It differs markedly from hard power in that it goes beyond the power and influence of financial wealth only. It involves additional elements such as prestige and reputation, proactive efforts at agenda setting, and creating interest-maximizing opportunities or capitalizing on opportunities as they emerge.

There are four key components to subtle power (table 1). The first involves safety and security as guaranteed through physical and military protection. This first component does not necessarily involve force projection and the imposition of a country's will on another through coercion or bribe. This sense of security may not even be internally generated and could come in the form of military and physical protection provided by a powerful patron—say, the United States. It simply arises from a country's own sense of safety and security. As such, it frees up political leaders to expend available resources on other, potentially equally or more costly, endeavors aimed at building up international prestige and buying influence. Political leader can never take the safety of their own position or of their country for granted. Waltz's sobering claim that all too frequently the state “conducts its affairs in the brooding shadow of violence” may be an exaggeration of an international system that is, nonetheless, governed by self-help and anarchy.² But only when a state can reasonably rest assured that its security is not under constant threat by domestic opponents or by international enemies and adversaries, can it then devote its attention to enhancing its external powers and influence. A state preoccupied with setting its domestic house in order, or paranoid about plots hatched by domestic and international conspirators bent on undermining it, has a significantly more difficult time trying to enhance its regional and global positions than a state with a certain level of comfort about its domestic stability.

1. After the US's subtle participation in the NATO campaign to oust Moammar Qaddafi from power in in 2011, through the organization's imposition of a no-fly zone over Libyan airspace in support of rebel forces operating on the ground, the phrase “leading from behind” was used to describe an emerging “Obama doctrine”. “It's a different definition of leadership than America is known for,” wrote *The New Yorker*. “Pursuing our interests and spreading our ideals ... requires stealth and modesty as well as military strength.” Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring remade Obama's foreign policy,” *The New Yorker*, (May 2, 2011), p. 55.

2. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 102.

The two contrasting cases of Iran, whose intransigent regime is under the chronic threat of attack from Israel or the United States, and that of Qatar, which is confident of US military protection but aggressively pursues a policy of hedging, are quite telling.

Table 1. Key elements of subtle power

Source		Manifestation
Physical and military protection	→	Safety and security
Marketing and branding efforts	→	Prestige, brand recognition, and reputation
Diplomacy and international relations	→	Proactive presence as global good citizen
Purchases and global investments	→	Influence, control, and ownership

A second element of subtle power is the prestige that derives from brand recognition and developing a positive reputation. Countries acquire a certain image as a result of the behaviors of their leaders domestically and on the world stage, the reliability of the products they manufacture, their foreign policies, their responses to natural disasters or political crises, the scientific and cultural products they export, and the deliberate marketing and branding efforts they undertake. These may be derived from such diverse sources as a political leader's speeches to home crowds or at the United Nations, the consumer products that are affiliated with a country (especially automobiles and household appliances), movies or other artistic products that are exported abroad, or commonplace portrayals of a country and its leaders in the international media. When the overall image that a country thus acquires is on the whole positive—when, in Nye's formulation, it has soft power—then it can better position itself to capitalize on international developments to its advantage. By the same token, soft power enables a country to ameliorate some of the negative consequences of its missteps and policy failures.¹

Sometimes a positive image builds up over time. Global perceptions of South Korea and Korean products is a case in point. Despite initial reservations by consumers when they first broke into

1. Referring to two highly popular American television shows, van Ham makes the following observation: "As long as America presents the world with its *Desperate Housewives* and *Mad Men*, it seems to get away with policy failures like Iraq." van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics*, p. 164.

American and European markets in the 1980s, today Korean manufactured goods enjoy generally positive reputations in the United States and Europe.¹ At other times, as in the cases of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Qatar, political leaders try to build up an image and develop a positive reputation overnight. They hire public relations firms, take out glitzy advertisements in billboards and glossy magazines around the world, buy world-famous sports teams and stadiums, sponsor major sporting events that draw world-renowned athletes and audiences from across the world, spare no expenses in putting together national airlines that consistently rank at or near the top, spend millions of dollars on international conferences that draw to their shores world leaders and global opinion-makers, and build entire cities and showcase buildings that are meant to rival the world's most magnificent landmarks.

By themselves, prestige and reputation are of little utility in international affairs. But properly crafted and employed, they can help a country carve out strategic niches for itself in targeted areas. Prestige can enhance overall effectiveness in agenda-setting and in influencing—if not altogether shaping—frameworks and preferences.² Through focused expenditures on and apparent specializations in specific fields—such as sports, aviation, heritage conservation, interfaith dialogue, or international conflict resolution—a country can acquire expertise and aspire to norm entrepreneurship in that particular field. In international forums and even within regional and international organizations, such as the EU or the GCC, it can develop a positive reputation and even influence in that field.

This positive reputation is in turn reinforced by a third element of subtle power, namely proactive presence on the global stage. International branding and marketing efforts may be done by state-owned or even private enterprises with indirect support by the state. But they are complemented by a deliberately crafted diplomatic posture aimed at projecting—in fact, reinforcing—an image of the

1. Consumers are shown to form attitudes toward products based on perceptions about the products' country of origin, and vice versa. There are "structural interrelationships between country image, beliefs about product attitudes, and brand attitudes." C. Min Han, "Country Image: Halo or Summary Construct?" *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 26, (May 1989), p. 228.

2. Here I draw on insights drawn from Bachrach and Baratz, "The Two Faces of Power".

country as a global good citizen. This is also part of a branding effort, but it takes the form of diplomacy rather than deliberate marketing and global media advertising. In Qatar's case, this diplomatic hyperactivism was part of a hedging strategy, as compared to bandwagoning or balancing, that has enabled the country to maintain open lines of communication, if not altogether friendly relations, with multiple international actors that are often antagonistic to one another (such as Iran and the United States). What on the surface may appear as paradoxical, perhaps even mercurial, foreign policy pursuits, is actually part of a broader, carefully nuanced strategy to maintain as many friendly relationships around the world as possible.

Not surprisingly, in the late 1990s and the early 2000s Qatar sought to carve out a diplomatic niche for itself in a field meant to enhance its reputation as a global good citizen, namely mediation and conflict resolution.¹ In a region known for its intra- and international crises and conflicts, Qatar has, so far largely successfully, carved out an image for itself as an active mediator, a mature voice of reason calming tensions and fostering peace. The same imperative of appearing as a global good citizen were at work in Qatar's landmark decision to join NATO's military campaign in Libya against Colonel Qaddafi in beginning in March 2011. Speculation abounded at the time as to the exact reasons that prompted Qatar to join NATO's Libya campaign.² Clearly, as with its mediation efforts, Qatar's actions in Libya were motivated by a hefty dose of realist considerations and calculations of possible benefits and power maximization.³ But the value of perpetuating a positive image through "doing the right thing", at a time when the collapse of the Qaddafi regime seemed only a matter of time, appears to trump other considerations. The remarks of a well-placed official and a member of the ruling family are telling. "We believe in democracy," he said, referring to Qatar's involvement in Libya.

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1. See Mehran Kamrava, "Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 4, (Autumn 2011), pp. 1-18.
 2. Peter Beaumont, "Qatar accused of interfering in Libyan affairs," *Guardian*, (October 4, 2011), p. 22.
 3. Reuters, "Qatar's Big Libya Adventure," *Arabianbusiness.com*, June 13, 2011; Andrew Hammond and Regan Doherty, "Qatar hopes for returns after backing Libyan winners," <http://af.reuters.com>. August 24, 2011.

We believe in freedom, we believe in dialogue, and we believe in that for the entire region... I am sure the people of the Middle East and other countries will see us as a model, and they can follow us if they think it is useful.¹

The final and perhaps most important element of subtle power is wealth, a classic hard power asset. Money provides influence within and control and ownership over valuable economic assets spread around the world. This ingredient of subtle power is the influence and control that is accrued through persistent and often sizeable international investments. As such, this aspect of subtle power is a much more refined and less crude version of “dollar diplomacy,” through which regional rich-boys seek to buy off the loyalty and fealty of the less well-endowed. Although by and large commercially driven, these investments are valued more for their long-term strategic dividends than for their shorter term yields. So as not to arouse suspicion or backlash, these investments are seldom aggressive. At times, they are often framed in the form of rescue packages that are offered to longstanding international companies with well-known brand names facing financial distress. Carried through the state’s primary investment arm the sovereign wealth fund (SWF), international investments were initially meant to diversify revenue sources and minimize risk from heavy reliance on energy prices. The purported wealth and secrecy of SWFs has turned them into a source of alarm and mystique for Western politicians and has ignited the imagination of bankers and academics alike.²

By itself, a SWF or other forms of international investment do not

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1. Sheikh Jabor bin Yusef bin Jassim al-Thani, former chief of staff in the offices of the prime minister and foreign minister, quoted in, Clifford Krauss, “For Qatar, Libyan Intervention May Be a Turning Point,” *New York Times*, (April 4, 2011), p. 9.
 2. A number of studies have empirically demonstrated that the size of SWFs have often been grossly exaggerated. See, for example, Jean-Francois Seznec, “The Gulf Sovereign Wealth Funds: Myths and Reality,” *Middle East Policy*, (Summer 2008), Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 97-110; Jean-Francois Seznec, “The Sovereign Wealth Funds of the Persian Gulf,” in *The Political Economy of the Persian Gulf*, Mehran Kamrava, ed. (New York, Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 69-93; and, Christopher Balding, “A Portfolio Analysis of Sovereign Wealth Funds,” in *Sovereign Wealth: The Role of State Capital in the New Financial Order*, Renee Fry, Warwick J McKibbin, and Justin O'Brien, eds. (London: Imperial College Press, 2011), pp. 43-70.

yield influence and power.¹ But wealth does give the state controlling the SWF the confidence it would not otherwise have had in its domestic and foreign policy pursuits. In international politics, wealth by itself does not garner power and influence. But it does foster and deepen self-confidence among the political leaders of wealthy countries. Wealth enables state leaders to aggressively brand their country, *if they choose to do so*. It also gives them the confidence and the resources to be diplomatically proactive and to engage in hedging. Wealth facilitates access, provides opportunities and space for being heard, and enables leaders to be better positioned to devise a “grand strategy” for their country. In Nye’s formulation,

A state’s “grand strategy” is its leaders’ theory and story about how to provide for its security, welfare, and identity, ... and that strategy has to be adjusted for changes in context. Too rigid an approach to strategy can be counterproductive. Strategy is not some symmetrical possession at the top of the government. It can be applied at all levels. A country must have a general game plan, but it must also remain flexible in the face of events.²

Clearly, agency is an important component of subtle power. More specifically, subtle power emerges not so much as a result of a confluence of institutional and structural forces, but is instead a product of deliberate decisions and carefully calculated choices made by policymakers. There are a number of wealthy countries in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere, some of which even employ proactive diplomacy as a favored foreign policy option. In Southeast Asia, for example, Malaysia and Singapore’s foreign policies in response to a rising China give meaning to the very essence of hedging.³ Others

1. In the aftermath of the global economic recession of 2008-2009, in fact, most SWFs were estimated to have lost substantial sums of money— according to one estimate, altogether in excess of \$66 billion by 2009—thus lessening their luster as lucrative investment instruments and as potential sources of power and influence. Bernardo Bertolotti, Veljko Fotak, William Megginson, and William Miracky, “Sovereign Wealth Fund Investment Patterns and Performance,” Unpublished manuscript, (July 2009), p. 1. I’m grateful to William Megginson for sharing a draft of this paper with me prior to its publication.

2. Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. 212.

3. Cheng-Chwee, “The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore’s Response to Rising China,” pp. 172-179.

with similar predicaments may also be engaged in aggressive branding and marketing campaigns. The emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, for example, often compete with one another and with Qatar in their global branding efforts.¹ But subtle power requires coordinating synergies between *all* four of its ingredients—military protection and security, global branding, hedging and proactive diplomacy, and international investments—and such a coordination does not occur on its own. It requires purposive choices and carefully calibrated policies. Here, the insights from all three forms of power—namely, creating conditions (Lukes), exercising influence (Dahl), and shaping perceptions (Bachrach and Baratz)—are helpful. Uniquely, the Qatari leadership was able to combine all four elements, resulting in a foreign policy that on the surface may appear “maverick” or “paradoxical”, and the cause of much speculation, and fulltime employment, for Western journalists and diplomats.² In reality, it is a foreign policy aimed at deepening, and at the same time regenerating, the country’s subtle power.

Qatar and the Pursuit of Subtle Power

Realists famously see the international arena as one existing in a state of anarchy, which fosters self-help on the part of individual states, whereby states cannot help but to look after their own interests. Doing so requires relying “on the means they can generate and the arrangements they can make for themselves.”³ It appears, certainly, that this is precisely what Qatar was doing. Despite structural constraints imposed by its small size and its unenviable geographic location, sandwiched as it is between Saudi Arabia to the south and Iran to the north, the four initiatives outlined here—hedging, branding, state autonomy, and comparative economic advantage—combined to propel Qatar into a position of prominence and influence.

1. The sponsorship of major football teams is a favorite branding tool for these three Persian Gulf emirates. Arsenal and Manchester City Football Clubs are sponsored by Emirates and Ettihad Airlines respectively, while Barcelona FC is sponsored by the Qatar Foundation.

2. Hugh Eakin, “The Strange Power of Qatar,” *The New York Review of Books*, (October 27, 2011), pp. 43-45.

3. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 111.

Undoubtedly, size does matter.¹ But it need not necessarily be a constraint. In fact, as we have seen Qatar has gone beyond ensuring its survivability and resilience and has managed to emerge as a regional powerhouse of sorts commercially and diplomatically.

Qatar's emergence as a significant player in regional and international politics was facilitated through a combination of several factors, chief among which were a very cohesive and focused vision of the country's foreign policy objectives and its desired international position and profile among the ruling elite, equally streamlined and agile decision-making processes, immense financial resources at the hands of the state, and the state's autonomy in the international arena to pursue foreign policy objectives.

Before delving into the details of how Sheikh Hamad's Qatar went about constructing its new regional and international profile, it is important to see what, if any, generalizable conclusions can be drawn based on the Qatari example concerning the study of power and also small states. Insofar as power is concerned, the Qatari case demonstrates that traditional conceptions of power, while far from having become altogether obsolete, need to be complemented with considerations arising from new and evolving global realities. For some time now, observers have been speculating about the steady shift of power and influence away from its traditional home for the last five hundred years or so, namely the West, in the direction of the East. In Fareed Zakaria's words, the "post-American world" may already be upon us.² Whatever this emerging world order will look like, it is obvious that the consequential actions of a focused and driven wealthy upstart like Qatar cannot be easily dismissed. Even if the resulting changes are limited merely to the identity of Qatar rather than to what it can actually do, which they are not, they are still consequential far beyond the small sheikhdom's borders. Change in the identity of actors—in how they perceive themselves and are perceived by others—can lead to changes in the international system.³ Qatar may not have re-drawn the geo-strategic map of the Middle East, and

1. Because of economies of scale, Nye maintains, larger countries will still benefit more from the information revolution for example, as they are better positioned to benefit from "network effects". Nye, *The Future of Power*, pp. 116-117.

2. Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

3. Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, p. 442.

whether that was what it indeed sought to do is open to question. But its emergence as a critical player in regional and global politics are as theoretically important as they were empirically observable.

One of the key lessons to be drawn here is that small states cannot always be relegated to the margins of power politics. With traditional conceptions of power—whether revolving around population size and military strength, or having to do with the appeal of cultural values and products—no longer adequately describing the forces that influence international politics, we can no longer assume that small state are invariably on the receiving end of power and influence. Power and influence may manifest themselves in ways that are not always readily observable and apparent. They may be exercised from behind the scenes, arise from a combination of resources and opportunities, and accrue over time as a result of calculated or ad hoc moves that capitalize on preferential positioning in the worlds of global finance and diplomacy. As such, the central resources for the exercise of this type of power become a clear vision of how to achieve preferred positions in institutions that are consequential on a global scale, or at regional levels, or within the domestic arenas of countries; the derive, determination, and situational opportunities of achieving such positions; and the wherewithal and the financial resources necessary to do so. For achieving these objectives, a country's small size is of little or no hindrance at all. What matter are vision, drive, and financial means.

Neither, it seems, is democracy a prerequisite for achieving a status of power. Nye correctly asserts that how a country conducts its affairs domestically becomes part and parcel of its overall attraction and appeal to those looking at it from the outside.¹ That may indeed be the case for the exercise and appeal of soft power. And, assuming that democracy is a universally sought-after value, democratic countries are on the whole more likely to have greater soft power as compared to non-democratic ones. But insofar as subtle power is concerned, streamlined decision-making processes and more centralized leadership are likely to give political leaders greater agility and responsiveness to emerging circumstances and opportunities as they develop regionally and globally. Particularly in a country with a

1. Nye, *Soft Power*, p. 14.

largely depoliticized population as Qatar, where domestic pressures on the state for political accountability and representation are conspicuous in their absence, lack of democracy has actually served as an asset in the exercise of subtle power rather than a hindrance.

The flip side of the coin is equally valid. Just because a state may be small and nimble, undemocratic, and wealthy, it will not inevitably emerge as a powerful actor in global affairs, or, for that matter, a necessarily consequential actor in international and regional politics. Singapore and Hong Kong both fit the bill, as do, to a lesser extent, Taiwan, which is a quasi-democracy, and Kuwait, whose designation as democratic would be a disservice to the notion. These countries may have the resources and the *potential* for the exercise of subtle power in international affairs. But the missing ingredient in each case is the purposive drive by state leaders to transform potential into actual power. Size may not matter, but agency does.

In this sense, in Qatar's determined drive to capitalize on its comparative advantage in terms of its resources, its location, and even its size, the sheikhdom stands apart from comparable countries in the Persian Gulf region—Bahrain, Kuwait, and even the UAE—and in fact from others in the rest of the Middle East. That Qatar was purposefully trying to redraw the geo-strategic map of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East through resort to subtle power is not in doubt. What remained unanswered is the extent to which the Qatari drive was sustainable in the long run.

The country's location in an ever-changing and notoriously unpredictable region introduced several imponderable variables. Clearly, one of the primary reasons for Qatar's ability to exercise subtle power in the late 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s was the regional context: Iraq were both internationally isolated and marginalized and simply incapable of exerting much power beyond their own borders; Iran was not in a much better position and could only buy the loyalty of non-state actors near and far; Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE were all saddled with stale and quite old leaderships that had neither the wherewithal nor the desire to exert regional leadership; and revenues from gas and oil sales only kept rising. Qatar, in other words, was enjoying a fortuitous "moment in history."¹

1. Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 165.

The regional context had already begun to change by the time the chief architects of the Qatar's subtle power departed from the scene in 2013. The 2011 Arab Uprisings jolted the Saudi leadership into action, prompting them to take the lead in a counter-revolution of sorts to reverse the tide of the Arab Spring in order to ensure the survival of their own and Bahrain's monarchy.¹ In Syria and Iraq, the Arab Spring, whose early manifestations Qatar so triumphantly capitalized on, turned into a nightmare of a religious extremism that put Al-Qaeda to shame. By 2015, with political leadership having effectively passed into the hands of a younger and more restless generation in both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia and the UAE rallied other Arab allies to join them in a relentless (though not fully successful) military campaign in Yemen—the most direct and violent form of hard power—despite continuing, and drastic, drops in the price of oil and gas in global markets. Qatar's young emir, only in his early thirties, found his country in a regional environment that was decidedly different than the one his father had enjoyed in his final years of rule.

Institutions are important in that they form the context and the parameters in which decisions are made. Context frames and shapes agency, and the evolving regional contexts of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf in the 2010s shaped emir Tamim's decision not to actively pursue policies that foster subtle power. After 2013, Qatar's subtle power came to an end.

1. Mehran Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution," *Orbis*, Vol. 56, No. 1, (Winter 2012), pp. 96-104.