Qatar wins a Geo-Political Jackpot

After ‘suffering’ a period of relative isolation and inaction, Qatar seems to have ‘win’ the necessary US and Arab support for playing the role of a ‘true’ ally of the US led geo-political ‘games’ in the Middle East. Notwithstanding the significance of the latest visit of Qatar’s Emir to the US, differences still remain unresolved between both States. However, the latest visit seems to have reduced a lot of heat between Qatar and the US on the one hand, and between Qatar and the Arab world on the other hand, paving the way for Qatar’s re-entry into regional politics.

Changing geo-political realities on two spectrums have directly come in Qatar’s aid to salvage it from getting derailed in the long and short run of regional political upheavals. For the US, Qatar has once again become relevant because of the need for acquiring an ingress into militant outfits and for maintaining the airbase. (It hosts the al-Udeid Air Base from where the Pentagon is launching many of its bombing strikes on Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria.) For the Arab world, specifically for GCC, Qatar has become relevant because of the need for establishing a united alliance against Iran in the wake of a possible Iran-US nuclear deal.

Before his meeting with the US President, Qatar’s Emir opined in New York Times that the prevailing circumstances prevailing in the Middle East warrant close co-operation between both states. That open letter, Qatar’s message to Obama, written eloquently describes, in so many words, Qatar’s larger than life ambitions. Not only does it aim to contest geo-politics in Syria and Iraq, but also in Yemen, Libya “and beyond.” Indeed, following the US’ decision to launch airstrikes against the ISIL, the US government has started to treat Qatar differently. Before the decision to launch strikes was taken, the US officials had been ‘publicly’ blaming Qatar for shaking international coalition against the ISIL. However, things have changed now, as now Qatar is providing the necessary logistical supplies, in the shape of its airbase, to facilitate this operation. No wonder, then, that Qatar had to change its own course too to ‘win’ the US’ favours to end its isolation.

The possible reason for Qatar’s re-entry after what had become a rapidly deepening diplomatic isolation in the region is its capacity as a regional power to negotiate, on behalf of other powers including the US, with militant groups. It is quite symptomatic not only of the growing power of militant groups but also of the need for regional powers to contain this influence and use it against certain specific targets such as Syria. In simple words, the US is trying to use Qatar’s influence to re-direct the ISIL’s energy towards its real target: Syria. That Qatar has an explicitly different policy towards militant groups was evident in an interview that the Emir gave to CNN.

"We don't fund extremists," Qatar’s Emir told CNN in an interview. But he said it would be a "big mistake" to brand all Islamist movements as extremist, and defended dealings with groups such as Hamas and the Brotherhood on the basis of their electoral successes in Gaza and Egypt. Because of these very links, the Qatari partnership with the United States is sometimes, although ironically, complicated but clearly beneficial to both sides. “Our interests converge in many more ways than they diverge,” said a senior US official. The emirate’s role as an interlocutor with militant movements has often proved a useful asset. Together with Turkey, Qatar was a principal pipeline to Hamas during talks to end the group’s war with Israel in the Gaza Strip during the summer of 2014. In addition, it also helped broker the freeing of five Taliban militants incarcerated at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba — who took up residence in Doha — in exchange for captured US soldier Bowe Bergdahl. The emirate also engineered last year’s release of an
American journalist, Peter Theo Curtis, who had been held hostage in Syria, a lucky exception to last year’s grisly parade of beheadings of Western reporters by the ISIL. From the US point of view, therefore, Qatar’s financial and hydrocarbon wealth, its political ingress into almost all major militant outfits, and accessible military facilities make it a major player in the Middle East despite its small size and sometimes infuriating action---hence, the need for reincorporating it in geo-political gambling.

Within the Mid-Eastern political spectrum, Qatar seems to have gained a lot following this betterment with the US. Qatar has scrambled to get back in the good graces of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council and to mend fences with Egypt, the Arab world’s most populous country and its traditional intellectual center. The emirate has made symbolic steps such as the never formally acknowledged ejection of seven Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood figures, who departed in September for Turkey. It has also moved to stem the flow of funds from wealthy private donors to extremist militant groups, some via what had heretofore been lightly regulated charities. Qatar’s neighbours, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, which had withdrawn their ambassadors in a highly public sign of strong displeasure, announced two months ago that they would send their envoys back.

As far as Qatar’s strained relations with Egypt are concerned, the US seems to have played its role in mellowing out bi-lateral tension as part of its new approach to dealing with the Middle East. Egyptian officials suggest that President Abdel Fattah Sisi, who was infuriated by Qatar’s support for toppled Islamist President Mohamed Morsi, may soon be ready to resume high-level contacts. The likelihood of rapprochement increased recently after Qatar acceded to Cairo’s demands to shut down the Brotherhood-boosting Egyptian arm of the emirate’s flagship broadcaster Al Jazeera, itself conceived as a projection of Qatari power and prestige.

However, despite these crucial developments, their relations still remain strained largely due to both states’ extremely divergent positions with regard to the ISIS/ISIL. Past claims that these differences had been patched up were undermined last week when Qatar withdrew its ambassador from Cairo to protest Egyptian airstrikes on “Islamic State”/ISIS fighters in Libya, prompting an Egyptian official to accuse Doha of supporting terrorism -- remarks that won swift Gulf condemnation which was then rapidly amended.

This rapprochement between Qatar and GCC led by Saudia seems to have taken place against the backdrop of a possible nuclear deal between Iran and the US and the consequent rising influence of Iran. The GCC seems to have been pressed by these changing geo-political realities to win the support of an important regional power, Qatar, to strengthen the “Suuni” block against the “Shia” block. It is for this very reason that the GCC has come out in support of Qatar against Egypt’s allegations on Qatar supporting terrorism in the region. Abdul Latif al-Zayani, secretary general of the Gulf Cooperation Council, said in a statement that it rejected Egypt’s accusation against Qatar. “These accusations do not help to consolidate Arab solidarity at a time when our Arab countries are subjected to major challenges to their security, stability and sovereignty,” he added further.

That Saudi Arabia is master-minding a united front against Iran is also apparent from the fact that Saudia has, once again, recently offered Israel to use its airspace to strike Iran. As a matter of fact, the once-tacit notion that Sunni states share a vital interest in Israel’s opposition to Shiite Iranian hegemony seems to be emerging from the domain of military and security services into the light of Arab public debate now. Fear of violence and chaos spreading from Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Iraq is combining with fear of an aggressive Iran to cast Israel in a new light; indeed, as an ally against Iran. These developments have greatly facilitated in re-casting Qatar and Saudia into new format of bi-lateral relations, leading the former to even disband its relations with Brotherhood, although on temporary and shadowy basis. It shows that Qatar is ready to accommodate Saudia’s concerns at the cost of just becoming relevant in geo-political alignments to secure long-term interests. Saudi Arabia and its associates want to safeguard their monarchies in the face of political Islam, and so as long as Qatar keeps its Muslim Brotherhood partners out of the Gulf States, there would not be any problem between GCC and Qatar.

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