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Despite Blockade, Opportunities are Increasing for Qatar to Develop Broader Regional Ties

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Brief Analysis

Now a two year standoff, the Gulf Crisis between the “Quartet States”—Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt—and Qatar have continued to shape Gulf foreign policy. In the wake of the declaration of a wide-scale boycott against Doha, the Quartet States have since attempted to impose land and sea “hoops” surrounding Qatar with the intention of cutting off its trade routes and exercising control over Gulf waters on both sides. While this embargo remains incomplete due to an attempted air blockade being **blocked** by the International Civil Aviation Organization, both sides continue to work to impose land and sea ‘hoops’ around the other, shifting their broader regional alliances in the process.

In the Gulf of Oman, [Saudi Arabia](#) has increased its investments in Gwadar Port, Pakistan—the economic dimension of the two states’ longstanding security cooperation. On the other side of the Gulf in the Bab al-Mandeb Straits, Saudi Arabia has also arranged an agreement to establish a military base in Djibouti. The UAE has focused its efforts on increasing its presence in Yemen, while blocking its neighbor Qatar from using its ports and pushing the central regional status of the ports of Dubai. Despite these efforts, however, Saudi and UAE attempts to bolster their economic, security, and commercial influence in the region are likely to have long-term negative consequences, impacting trade flow throughout region while straining relations with their neighbors in Central Asian and Horn of Africa.

In order to counter-balance these isolation efforts, it is in Qatar’s interest to work in cooperation with Pakistan, Oman, Somalia, and Djibouti to reestablish a balance of power throughout the Gulf and surrounding regions. Now that Qatar’s economy appears to have stabilized and new trade routes avoiding the blockade have been established, Qatar is in a position to provide an alternative to increasing Saudi and Emirati influence in the region.

A strategy of increased involvement in the broader Gulf region is essential to ensuring Qatar’s commercial prospects, economic and political stability, and security without provoking the discontent of neighboring states or major

powers. Already, significant Qatari investments in the aforementioned states suggest a pivot towards these regional areas. And despite Saudi and UAE efforts, the promise of a counterbalance to their influence may tempt even traditional allies like Pakistan to increase ties with Qatar. Especially in light of the increasing tensions between Iran and many Gulf States, the surrounding countries may see closer ties with Qatar as a means of ensuring that they are not dragged into the conflict.

Pakistan is perhaps the strongest and most significant link in this equation, as it possesses military strength and plays an important diplomatic role in the surrounding region. Despite the extent and durability of the relationship between Riyadh and Islamabad, Pakistan has little interest in being dragged into the polarizing Saudi-Iran conflict. In light of this, Qatar's new efforts to complete with Riyadh in contributing to the development of the Gwadar and Karachi Ports may be more welcome than one might expect. Qatar's approach appears to focus on long-term operational investments in Pakistan and contributions of petroleum with preferential rates—lower than the Saudi price. However, Qatar must balance any increased investments with caution over making any movement that could be perceived by the Pakistani government as hostile to Pakistani relations with other states in the region. It would also be necessary to increase both political and media focus on an economic cooperation framework, which will develop state relations over time. The Qatari minister of commerce Ali al-Kuwait has already stated that bilateral trade increased by 230 percent during 2018, demonstrating the effects of this pivot towards Pakistan. Trade growth is complemented by the economic aid, support in the energy field and the mutually beneficial commercial and investment projects, as well as increased cooperation in military industries.

Oman has demonstrated its potential to ally in reversing the attempted Saudi-Emirati blockade. Despite Oman's longstanding attitude of neutrality, a historical border dispute with the UAE and security-related paranoia regarding both Saudi Arabia and the UAE make Oman more likely to be receptive to Qatari overtures. Goods are already directed primarily to Oman in order to reach Qatar due to the boycott, and in June 2017, the Qatar Ports Management Company launched a shipping line linking the Hamad Port in Qatar with the Sohar Port in Oman. This, along with the Sultanate's intense desire to preserve a balance in its foreign relations without clearly mobilizing behind any one state, confirms Oman as an effective ally. There is room for Qatar to enter into further economic cooperation agreements in a number of areas and provide mechanisms for granting Omani ports state, regional, and international importance through increased investment and a push toward utilizing these ports on a global scale.

In the Horn of Africa, disputes with the Emirates also make Djibouti and Somalia likely options for Qatar to develop closer ties. Djibouti in particular is of similar importance to Oman and Pakistan in terms of securing trade through the gulf, due to its commercial and military advantages. Djibouti's role in the conflict has grown because of its strategic location near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal, as well as its relative stability compared to other Horn of Africa countries.

Djibouti's recent conflict with the UAE stems from the 2015 "War of Ports" Aden, Yemen, when the Emirates attempted to use Djibouti as a base for its incursion into the south. UAE's military and security cooperation with other actors in the region—such as China and Italy—has cemented the UAE's position in the horn of Africa, but Djibouti remains a major player uncomfortable with increasing Emirati presence. In contrast, Djibouti enjoys positive relations with Saudi Arabia, as the latter [played a vital role](#) in mediating between Djibouti and Eritrea. Saudi investment in the region has led to increased development of strategic military bases, including a partnership with Djibouti to build a base there in 2017. However, increased Qatari investments—either directly or indirectly through multinational and private countries—could provide a sense of greater flexibility in Djibouti in terms of foreign investment sources.

Somalia resembles Djibouti when it comes to its bitter dispute with the UAE, but differs from it in terms of the nature of its relationships with the Saudi Kingdom. Saudi-Somali relations remain on a purely economic level and have not

yet reached the point of establishing a Saudi military base in Somalia. Moreover, Somali-UAE relations have become particularly tense in the past year, as Abu Dhabi infringed on [Mogadishu's sovereignty](#) by signing an agreement with Somaliland, an autonomous region of Somalia. Recently, Somali elites have increasingly come to believe that economic cooperation with the UAE, which includes its role in operating Somali ports, is in fact part of the Emirates' "war of the ports." In this way, frustrations with the Emirates' attitudes towards Horn of Africa ports allow a mechanism for increasing rapprochement with Qatar.

In theory, Qatari efforts to increase its relations with these countries could actually reverse Saudi and UAE efforts to encircle Qatar via land and sea. Strengthening of relations is more likely in some states than others; Pakistan and Djibouti are both more complicated targets, since Riyadh has attached great importance to developing harmonious relations with these states for years, with Riyadh and Islamabad in particular possessing a strong history of military and economic cooperation.

However, Saudi efforts to woo these two countries are all the more reason for Qatar to work towards rapprochement with both these states and others in the Gulf region. Deteriorating relations with the Emirates may currently present a key opening for rapprochement, suggesting that now is the perfect time for Qatar to make these relations a priority. Although Qatar has already succeeded in weakening the impact of the boycott, countering the Saudi-Emirati strategy of forming land and sea "hoops" should be granted priority to provide effective alternatives, which can stand the test of a comparable boycott in the future and, ultimately, promise a more stable and balanced trade environment for all parties involved. ❖



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