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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Small States and Pandemic: Qatar's Approach

By Deep Datta Ray

SYNOPSIS

As Singapore reassesses its threats to convert them into opportunities, it may benefit from learning how other small states overcome their own constraints imposed by geography, history and proximity to neighbouring countries.

COMMENTARY

AT THE Singapore [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Town Hall](#) on 22 June 2020, Minister Dr Vivian Balakrishnan spoke of operating in the new normal engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Underscoring this is a fundamental concern: managing and converting challenges into opportunities for small states.

Doing so in a post-pandemic and post-globalisation world is fraught with uncertainty. It may be lessened by borrowing Dr Balakrishnan's framework to assess how another small state, Qatar, handles its challenges.

Innovation in the New Normal

The Singapore foreign minister notes that COVID-19 accelerates pre-existing global threats, including climate change, nuclear proliferation and cyber attacks. The pandemic exacerbates inequality, debt, resistance to globalisation, and divergences between technology and supply chains. Additionally, work-from-home is work-from-anywhere, which means that regardless of location, everyone competes.

The pandemic is also sharpening geopolitics. US-China rivalry is intensifying. The US is questioning its commitment to external engagement and global forums, but China is stepping up globally. There are regional tensions too, and as India and China illustrate, these can flare up.

Qatar's opportunity creation in the new normal is in fintech, aviation and digitisation. Innovation is however incipient, lacks first-mover advantage, costly, and might be insufficient in managing blue-collar worker's mistreatment.

[Qatar Mobile Payments System](#) was launched in April. Its electronic wallet taps the non-banking sector and so boosts local SMEs' clientele. The System is the kernel for a [fintech industry](#) and seeks US investment to make Qatar a hub. There will however be competition from the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and others, who already have similar systems and plans in place.

Qatar Airways' loss-making strategy to gain market share meant operations were not curtailed but flights were added and ticketing made very flexible. Ranked 19th in 2019 Qatar Airways is now the [top passenger](#) carrier — at a cost. Working capital has been expended, a bailout is almost certain, and at least [20 percent](#) of the fleet will be permanently grounded.

Education's digitisation – using Microsoft Teams and YouTube – attunes Qatari students to global competition. However, transnational education has been [significantly worsened](#) by the pandemic as there is scant student interest in higher education institutions, even regionally.

Digitisation, Multilateralism and Cyber Security

Supply chains are being digitised to maintain globalisation. '[Better Connections](#)' gives blue-collar workers computers and training to enhance contact with family and engage in online commerce. It is to be seen if this will stop blue-collar workers [fleeing](#) mismanagement in the wake of COVID-19, or entice them to return. At least 34 blue-collar workers [have died](#). Moreover, perceptions have taken a hit as they continue to [protest](#) poor conditions, non-payment of salaries, and having to [beg](#) on the streets to stave off starvation.

The condition of workers in the wake of the pandemic has also undermined climate change innovation. Qatar pledged a carbon-neutral FIFA World Cup 2022 but green architecture plans for naturally air-cooled buildings have been [delayed](#) by infections and deaths amongst workers.

Doha prefers a mix of multilateral organisations, the rule of law, and NGOs to manage concerns, like Singapore's, in the world after the threat of COVID-19 recedes.

Multilateralism is preferred in nuclear matters. Doha commended the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on developing protocols for [nuclear containment](#) of COVID-19 infection and ensuring reactor safety during the pandemic. Qatar also asked [the IAEA](#) to address concerns about the UAE's Barakah nuclear plant and expects its help in drafting a regional nuclear security framework.

In the first quarter of 2020 Qatar faced at least 2,033 COVID-19 related [cyber attacks](#). In May, Qatar's [UN ambassador](#) committed to curtailing cyber crime via the world body and called for an international instrument for cyber security. Pre-pandemic, Qatar had condemned unilateral policing in tackling the rapid rise in abuse and misuse of the cyber domain. International cooperation is necessary to establish relevant rules and norms.

Responsiveness to NGOs allows Qatar to maintain the rule of law and enhance international perceptions to some degree. [Amnesty International](#) reported a weakness in the mandatory COVID-19 tracing app EHTERAZ, and the authorities responded. An employer was banned thanks to Amnesty uncovering mistreatment of around 100 blue-collar workers. The scale of their protests however suggest NGOs can do little to avert [maltreatment](#) or perceptions.

Post COVID-19: Still Friend to All

Enmeshed in Sino-US and regional rivalries, Qatar might well be in a post-globalisation world which has fostered resilience. Doha engages multilaterally, in a rule-bound manner, and most successfully, by making friends across camps.

In May, a [US official revealed](#) America had asked allies and partners to sever ties with China. Weeks prior to the revelation, but certainly after Washington began pressuring allies, Qatar [handed China](#) its largest shipbuilding contract to date. China is Qatar's third largest trading partner after the Republic of Korea and Japan. Nevertheless, Al Udeid base continues to host some 10,000 US troops and remains the forward base for America's Central Command.

Qatar's '[relationship of necessity](#)' with Iran arises from shared ownership of the South Pars/North Field gas field. Iran also allows use of its airspace during the blockade following Qatar's refusal to join the war in Yemen, and this enabled Qatar Airways to continue its flight operations to regional and international destinations. Qatar continues to support Iran in several areas, despite American opposition.

The Yemeni conflict has embroiled Qatar since 2017 in diplomatic rupture with its neighbours. Qatar remains open to [any initiative](#) by anyone to end the blockade so long as its sovereignty is maintained. Moreover, the blockade has inculcated the resilience necessary to overcome COVID-19 challenges. [Food sustainability](#) is indicative. When dairy supplies from neighbours dried, Qatar imported cows and began dairy and meat farming. Achieved at great cost, it continues to operate at a loss.

The Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) inability to mediate an end to the blockade does not turn Doha away from it. Indeed, Qatar remains intent on [participating](#) in GCC meetings, especially those on jointly fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. The commitment to [the GCC](#) and regional multilateralism is apparent — Qatar strongly refutes speculation that it is contemplating renouncing membership.

Clearly Qatar's proactive approach overlaps with Singapore's concerns. It remains to be seen however if, amongst other factors, workers return, perceptions recover, and

the capital intensity of Doha's measures is plausible in the *longue durée* of the new normal.

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