

Qatar, purchasing security?

Qatar is currently at the centre of a geopolitical storm with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE accusing Doha of working against regional stability. As tensions continue to rise, in what is known to be a particularly volatile region, several reports point to a sharp increase in the purchase of modern advanced weaponry by Qatar.

Military build-ups can occur as a result of an increasing risk of war or at best, according to International Relations theory, for deterrence purposes. Doha's 2017 (\$173 USD million) purchase of 200 JSOW glide bombs from the United States(US) Department of Defence appears to fit perfectly in the ancient Latin saying, *Si vis pacem, para bellum*, if seeking peace, prepare for war. Additionally in 2016-2017, Qatar entered the top three in the ranking of defence importers only behind India and Saudi Arabia, and importing more than Australia and Canada.

It would be misleading, to link Doha's sharp defence increase to the rising tensions with the four boycotting countries alone: Qatar already ranked sixth in 2015, after significantly increasing imports from France and the US. Moreover, It is useful to remember that defence expenditure in the Arab Gulf has always been very high compared to other areas of the world—as a result of the implicit 'oil for security' pact developed with the US. This implicit pact, explored for decades in academic literature specialised on regional security, allegedly entails that the Gulf Cooperation Council(GCC) states are to be covered by the American security umbrella in exchange for a continued oil flow and conspicuous investments in the US defence sector.

The enhancement of Qatar's military equipment is unlikely to constitute a decisive factor in escalating or bringing the intra-Gulf dispute to an end for a variety of reasons. The confrontation between Qatar and the Saudi-led bloc is likely to continue, at least in the short term, in the shape of an information war—waged via media outlets, public relations firms—and by gaining international support, without involving combat between the armed forces. Sporadic airspace violations and disturbance to civilians airliners should be understood as highly symbolic and calculated provocations. Small sized Gulf states have purchased military equipment according to their strategic needs, which, until Doha's apparent defection seeking Turkish and Iranian protection, have been focused on establishing an inter-operational defence system.

Doha's weapons purchases benefit weapons exporters and have been used for lobbying purposes. Qatar is certainly economically suffering (the most) for the intra-GCC crisis and is strongly concerned about its continuation. As such, Doha hopes to draw enough international pressure to

force Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE to soften their Qatar-hostile stance. This is testified by the diversification of Qatari purchases. Since the Gulf rift erupted, Doha has bought 24 British Typhoon fighter jets, 15 American F-15 fighter aircraft (re: \$12 billion,USD) 24 French Dassault Rafale fighter aircraft, seven warships from Italy (re: \$6 billion,USD) 62 tanks from Germany (re: \$2 billion,USD) and military gear from Turkey (re: \$2 billion,USD). In its lobbying effort, Qatar is going as far as to purchase \$500-million worth of S-400 anti-aircraft system produced by Russia's state-run arms exporter Rosoboronexport, perhaps in an attempt to partially counterbalance the (re: \$3 billion,USD) deal signed by Saudi Arabia and the Russian company.

The lobbying purpose related to Qatar's defence purchases further confirms the fact that the Al-Thani family relies on international backing, rather than domestic assets, to ensure protection and regime survival. The US, until very recently, through their significant military presence at the Al-Udeid Air Base—the largest of the US Air Force in the MENA—constituted a powerful and reliable protector against all external threats to Qatar. However, President Trump's support for Saudi Arabia, and the public suggestion made by US National Security Advisor, General Herbert McMaster, of closing the Al-Udeid Air Base while reinforcing US Air force presence in the UAE, cast uncertainty over the future of American commitments to Qatar. Despite this, current international developments suggest that Doha's defence does not depend on the arms trade but on the ever-deepening Ankara-Doha relationship. The long-term presence of Turkish troops on Qatari soil and the strong support to Qatar repeatedly voiced by Turkey's President Erdogan is set to be, and already constitutes, the bastion that Doha's establishment will use to weather the current geopolitical storm.

The discussion of the reasons behind it should not lift the focus on the arms race which is currently unravelling in the Arab Gulf. Leaving aside implications on the potentially destructive effects of the new equipment currently being purchased, arms races often end with wars. As such, the international community should increase its focus on the current situation in the Arab Gulf to avoid yet another armed conflict in the already troubled MENA.

Author: Antonino Occhiuto

Publication: 24 January 2018