

Choosing not to choose: Qatar’s hedging in the US-China rivalry

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Article Info	Abstract
Original Article Main Object: International relations Scope: Qatar, US, China Received: 17 September 2025 Revised: 27 September 2025 Accepted: 29 September 2025 Published online: 06 October 2025 Keywords: great power competition, geopolitics, Qatar, strategic hedging, US-China rivalry.	This paper analyzes Qatar’s geopolitical strategy amid intensifying U.S.– China rivalry, asking whether Doha aligns, remains neutral, or strategically hedges. As a small but wealthy Gulf state, Qatar presents a critical case: it anchors U.S. security through hosting Al Udeid Air Base and holding Major Non-NATO Ally status, while simultaneously deepening economic integration with China via record-long Liquefied natural gas (LNG) contracts. These dual alignments provide an ideal lens to test the viability of hedging under great-power competition. The study applies realism, liberalism, and hedging theory: realism highlights Qatar’s reliance on U.S. defense guarantees; liberalism emphasizes interdependence and institutions; hedging theory best explains Doha’s dual-track engagement as insurance under uncertainty. Methodologically, it employs multi-method qualitative analysis: content analysis codes policy choices, process tracing reconstructs key episodes—the Gulf blockade, Ukraine war, Huawei 5G dilemma—and discourse analysis interprets official rhetoric. Findings show Qatar deliberately hedges, enhancing autonomy but risking mistrust, asymmetric security dependence, and narrowing space as rivalry intensifies.
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1. Introduction

Across the world, the strategic rivalry between the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been intensified. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Middle East, where Gulf states are navigating pressures from both powers. Qatar, a small but wealthy Gulf state, occupies a unique geopolitical position that makes its foreign policy choices especially significant amid this US–China competition. Despite its small size, Qatar wields outsized influence through its vast natural gas reserves (Zreik, 2025), formidable sovereign wealth fund, and proactive diplomatic initiatives. It hosts Al Udeid Air Base – the largest US military facility in the region – and was designated a Major Non-NATO Ally by Washington in 2022 (*Reuters*, 2022b).

Meanwhile, Qatar was the first Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member to establish a strategic partnership with China in 2014 (Chaziza, 2020), and China has since become a critical economic partner for Doha. These dual alignments raise the question: Is Qatar aligning with one superpower, maintaining neutrality, or engaging in a strategic hedge between the US and China?

This paper, therefore, explores Qatar's geopolitical strategy in the context of the burgeoning US–China rivalry. It assesses Qatar's behavior and official posture to determine whether Doha is hedging i.e. pursuing a middle path to maximize benefits and minimize risks or leaning toward neutrality or open alignment.

The analysis spans political relations, economic ties, security cooperation, and diplomatic engagements with both the US and China. The research draws on existing literature on small-state strategies in great power politics, applying theoretical lenses from realism, liberalism, and hedging theory. Current developments as of 2025 are incorporated to ensure the discussion reflects the latest trends, such as Qatar's recent energy deals with China and renewed defense agreements with the US.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The literature review surveys scholarly perspectives on how small states navigate great power rivalry, including concepts of balancing, bandwagoning, neutrality, and hedging. The theoretical framework outlines how realism, liberalism, and hedging theory each explain (or fail to explain) Qatar's strategic choices. Next, Qatar's bilateral relations with the US and China provides a detailed overview of Qatar's ties with each power– covering trade, energy, military cooperation, and political relations– to establish the factual baseline of Qatar's engagements. The core analytical section, strategic hedging or neutrality: evidence and analysis, examines Qatar's foreign policy behavior (such as defense agreements, public statements, and international initiatives) for evidence of hedging or neutrality. Specific cases, including Qatar's balancing act during the 2017–2021 Gulf crisis and its positioning on issues like technology and infrastructure partnerships, are discussed. The risks and limitations of

Qatar's strategy section address potential challenges to Doha's approach: for example, the possibility that escalating US–China tensions could force Qatar into difficult choices, or that hedging could invite mistrust from both sides. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the findings and policy implications, concluding that Qatar predominantly engages in strategic hedging amid the US-China rivalry, and considers the future sustainability of this strategy. The paper, hence, aims to contribute to the understanding of small-state agency in great power competition, using Qatar as a case study grounded in current events and IR theory.

This study advances the literature by (1) disentangling hedging from neutrality with observable indicators across security, energy, tech, and diplomacy; (2) extending hedging theory to a Gulf small state and specifying threshold conditions under which rivalry compresses hedging space; and (3) showing mechanism-level evidence—via process tracing of the 2017–2021 blockade and post-2023 shocks—that Qatar practices a security-anchored hedge rather than passive neutrality.

2. Literature review: Small-state strategies in great power competition

Small states have long employed adaptive strategies to safeguard their autonomy when navigating rivalries among great powers. International Relations (IR) scholarship traditionally highlights four alignment options: balancing against threats, bandwagoning with stronger states, maintaining neutrality, or adopting more flexible approaches such as hedging (Kuik, 2021; Walt, 1987; Waltz, 1979).

2.1. Balancing and Bandwagoning

Realist theory emphasized balancing and bandwagoning as the primary responses available to weaker states. Waltz (1979) and Walt (1987) argued that states either ally against threatening powers (balancing) or align with stronger ones (bandwagoning) (Schweller, 2016; Walt, 1987; Waltz, 1979). Balancing seeks to counter domination through coalition-building, while bandwagoning is often motivated by fear or opportunism. Yet these binary choices do not adequately capture the complexity of contemporary small-state behavior, especially under uncertainty. For Qatar, balancing against either the U.S. or China is implausible, as neither is an outright enemy, while full bandwagoning with one risks alienating the other (Levick & Schulz, 2020).

2.2. Neutrality

Neutrality constitutes another option: abstaining from military alliances and avoiding alignment in rivalries. However, neutrality is difficult to sustain when economic and security interests are intertwined with rival

powers; classic and contemporary analyses underscore both the normative appeal and practical constraints of neutrality for small states (Agius & Devine, 2011; Goetschel, 1999; Karsh, 2012). For Qatar, a formal U.S. security partnership complicates strict neutrality claims. Some scholars view hedging as a dynamic, pragmatic variant of neutrality— active engagement with competing powers without committing fully to either— blurring the boundary between the two in practice (Gaens et al., 2023; Kawasaki, 2021).

2.3. Hedging

In small state strategy, hedging has become a central concept particularly in Southeast Asia's response to U.S.-China rivalry (Goh, 2007; 2008; Kuik, 2016; 2021). Hedging is an insurance-seeking behavior under high uncertainty and high stakes whereby states pursue contradictory measures toward competing powers to maintain fallback options. In practice, hedging entails cultivating economic and diplomatic ties with rising powers while preserving security commitments with established ones; unlike neutrality, hedging is proactive and deliberately engages both sides— even in seemingly contradictory ways— to maximize autonomy and flexibility (Kuik, 2008). These dynamics are increasingly shaped by corridor politics such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which links inland logistics to Gulf-facing maritime nodes and shifts demand/bargaining in energy and shipping (Hafeznia et al., 2026).

The Gulf context shows how regional actors have hedged under the U.S. security umbrella while deepening economic ties with China (Fulton, 2020). Although much work centers on Saudi-Iranian dynamics, these insights extend to extra-regional rivalries. Qatar's foreign policy since the 1990s is often characterized as “diplomatic hedging”, leveraging hydrocarbon wealth and U.S. security guarantees to cultivate ties with diverse, sometimes competing actors (Bakir & Al-Shamari, 2025; Hamdi & Salman, 2020; Kamrava, 2015). Thus, hedging is not new to Qatar, but a longstanding strategy adapted to new geopolitical realities. Persistent Red Sea insecurity tied to the Yemen conflict has elevated routing and insurance risks, functioning as an exogenous stressor on Gulf hedging strategies (Sahraie, 2025). In parallel, analyses of China's oceanic emergence— from historical voyages to the contemporary ‘String of Pearls’— show how commercial port investments carry security externalities that Gulf small states must price into strategy (Aghamohammadi & Fattahi, 2025).

2.4. Hedging vs. Alignment

The U.S.-China rivalry has reinvigorated debates about hedging's prevalence and limits. Many states resist binary choices and treat hedging as a strategic norm to balance U.S. security ties with Chinese economic opportunities (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019; Lim & Cooper,

2015; Shambaugh, 2020). In Southeast Asia, ASEAN members commonly hedge; similar patterns are visible in the Gulf, where states diversify partnerships—expanding trade, investment, and energy linkages with China while sustaining security ties with Washington (Alterman, 2024; Fulton, 2020). This behavior aligns with hedging theory: neither full alignment nor strict neutrality, but calibrated engagement with both sides.

However, the literature warns that hedging has limits: it is viable only while rivalry stops short of forcing hard choices; if tensions escalate, small states may be compelled to align. Others argue the “room” for hedging can shrink as systemic pressures mount, creating reputational risks and requiring deft management of contradictions (Korolev, 2019; Kuik, 2021). These concerns are particularly relevant for Qatar, which relies on the U.S. security umbrella yet is increasingly integrated with China economically. At the same time, Western trading-state responses post-Ukraine—rearmament, supply-chain hardening, and industrial policy—tighten the security-economy nexus and reduce tolerance for ambiguous tech/infrastructure ties (Shojaie & Bahrami Moghadam, 2025).

2.5. Research gap

Despite growing attention to hedging, several gaps remain. Much of the core theorizing and empirical work focuses on Southeast Asia, leaving the Middle East—and especially the Gulf—underexplored in the context of U.S.-China rivalry (Goh, 2007; 2008; Kuik, 2016). Gulf studies have often emphasized balancing amid the Saudi-Iranian rivalry rather than analyzing how small states manage layered competitions that combine regional contests with extra-regional great-power rivalry (Fulton, 2020). The conceptual ambiguity between neutrality and hedging also remains under-specified; Qatar’s discourse of “not taking sides” contrasts with its proactive, multi-vector engagement, offering a useful case to refine these boundaries (Worrall, 2021). Finally, while scholars caution that hedging is sustainable only short of open confrontation, we lack empirical analyses of how small states prepare for a potential collapse of hedging space. Examining Qatar’s foreign policy thus tests the durability of hedging under intensifying U.S.-China rivalry and sharpens its conceptual distinctiveness.

2.6. Current regional environment (2023-2025)

Since October 2023, the Middle East’s security environment has been defined by the Gaza war and stop-start diplomacy centered in Doha. Working with the US and Egypt, Qatar has repeatedly hosted indirect talks on ceasefire and hostage exchanges; yet, facing political cross-pressures, it has at times publicly re-evaluated or paused its mediation to press the parties for seriousness (Mills & Al-Mughrab, 2024). These cycles underscore both Doha’s convening power and the structural

limits of shuttle diplomacy amid hardening positions.

Conflict spillovers at sea have added material costs. Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, prompted by the Gaza war, triggered a US-led maritime security effort (Operation Prosperity Guardian) and widespread rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope. Diversions lengthened voyages and raised freight and insurance costs; UN-tracked data show average transit times spiking by roughly 50% during the initial rerouting phase. By mid-2025, more than 100 merchant vessels had been targeted, including multiple sinkings, keeping risk premia elevated (Blanchard, 2025). For a gas exporter whose cargoes and trade finance are exposed to Suez/Red Sea chokepoints, these disruptions directly affect earnings, schedules, and hedging calculations.

Moreover, U.S. military posture remains deeply embedded in Qatar. Al Udeid Air Base serves as the forward headquarters of U.S. Central Command and hosts roughly 10,000 troops; Washington extended its presence there for another decade in 2024, reinforcing Qatar's role as a pivotal logistics and command hub. The 2022 designation of Qatar as a Major non-NATO Ally further formalized this long-standing security alignment (Reuters, 2025b).

Energy and great-power economics also shape the context. Qatar Energy concluded multiple 27-year LNG supply agreements with China (e.g., Sinopec, 2023), while the U.S.-Qatar Golden Pass project advanced toward initial operations in 2025 after delays and regulatory extensions- developments that diversify outlets across the Atlantic and Pacific. Meanwhile, the China-brokered Saudi-Iran rapprochement (March 2023) lowered direct Gulf confrontation risks even as Gaza-linked tensions persisted (Gambrell, 2023). Together, these dynamics compress Doha's "room to maneuver", pushing a security-anchored hedge: deepen U.S. defense ties while safeguarding market access in Asia.

3. Theoretical framework: Realism, liberalism, and hedging theory

Qatar's geopolitical strategy can be analyzed through different IR theories, each offering distinct insights into its balancing act between the US and China. Realism highlights survival and security concerns, liberalism emphasizes interdependence and cooperation, while hedging theory provides a tailored explanation for Doha's dual engagement.

3.1. Realist perspective

Realism remains the dominant lens for understanding small-state behavior in an anarchic international system. States respond to threats by balancing or bandwagoning with stronger powers (Grzelczyk, 2019; Wivel, 2008). For Qatar, whose sovereignty has often been challenged by larger neighbors, alignment with the US represents a rational survival strategy. Hosting the Al Udeid Air Base, home to U.S. Central

Command, ensures Qatar protection against potential aggression from Iran or Saudi Arabia (Ulrichsen, 2020). Realists would interpret this as balancing through alliance with the preeminent global power.

Yet Doha's simultaneous cultivation of China complicates a purely realist reading. While some interpret this as "soft balancing" to avoid overdependence on the US (Paul, 2005), realism does not fully explain why Qatar invests heavily in ties that extend beyond immediate security needs. The concept of omnibalancing, which accounts for leaders balancing internal and external threats simultaneously (David, 1991), offers nuance but still overlooks the broader diplomatic and economic dimensions of Qatar's diversification. Thus, while realism explains Qatar's U.S. alignment, it cannot fully capture the strategic rationale for engaging Beijing.

3.2. Liberal perspective

Liberal theories stress interdependence, absolute gains, and the role of institutions. Qatar's economic diversification and diplomatic branding reflect liberal logics of maximizing mutual benefits. China has become Doha's largest LNG customer, supporting liberal claims that economic ties reduce incentives for conflict (Copeland, 2014). American companies such as ExxonMobil also remain deeply involved in Qatar's energy sector, while Qatar invests heavily in US tech and real estate markets. It depicts the mutually reinforcing nature of economic globalization.

Qatar has also embedded itself in institutional frameworks. It signed on early to China's Belt and Road Initiative and became the region's first offshore renminbi clearing hub in 2015 (Rakhmat, 2015). At the same time, it participates in the annual U.S.-Qatar Strategic Dialogue and supports U.S.-led initiatives on counterterrorism and regional stability (ibid). Liberalism therefore highlights Qatar's pragmatic effort to secure prosperity and status through global cooperation.

Nevertheless, liberal explanations risk glossing over the contradictions in great-power competition. Interdependence may generate benefits, but rivalry between the US and China means that Qatar must constantly reassure both sides that its cooperation with the other is not threatening. Liberal theory underestimates these tensions, assuming mutual gains without fully addressing the geopolitical costs of dual engagement.

3.3. Hedging theory and neoclassical realism

Hedging theory provides a more direct account of Qatar's dual-track strategy as it is an insurance-seeking behavior under high uncertainty and high stakes, where states deliberately avoid choosing sides by pursuing contradictory policies. For Qatar, uncertainty surrounds whether Washington will remain committed to the Gulf and how far

China's influence will expand globally. By maintaining robust defense ties with the US while deepening economic cooperation with Beijing, Doha avoids putting "all its eggs in one basket".

The 2017–2021 blockade by Saudi Arabia and its allies highlighted the vulnerabilities of dependence. Although the US ultimately supported Qatar, the crisis reinforced the logic of diversification, leading Doha to strengthen ties with non-Western partners including China (Kabbani, 2021). Energy exports, infrastructure deals, and financial cooperation with Beijing now form part of a wider hedge against U.S. retrenchment.

Neoclassical realism adds further nuance by emphasizing leadership perceptions and domestic choices. Qatar's rulers, from Emir Hamad to Emir Tamim, have pursued a pragmatic strategy of maximizing autonomy while avoiding entrapment (Kamrava, 2015). Hosting Taliban negotiations (Badad, 2025), investing in soft power using global media (*Al Jazeera*) (Ullah, 2024), and positioning Qatar as a diplomatic mediator are all part of this active hedging. Recent scholarship even frames hedging as a form of "secondary state neutrality", where states remain "in-between" rivals not passively, but through deliberate engagement (Figiaconi, 2025). Qatar exemplifies this approach: rhetorically neutral, yet materially invested in both Washington and Beijing.

3.4. Synthesis

Realism explains Qatar's reliance on U.S. security, liberalism highlights its pursuit of economic and institutional gains, and hedging theory best captures the synthesis of these moves as a deliberate strategy of dual engagement. Doha's policy can thus be theorized as strategic hedging: cultivating ties with both powers to insure against uncertainty, expand options, and safeguard autonomy. This framework guides the following analysis of Qatar's concrete relations with Washington and Beijing.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, theory-driven single-case study to examine Qatar's geopolitical strategy in the context of US-China rivalry. Case studies are particularly well-suited to exploring contemporary political phenomena where contextual complexity and process analysis are crucial.

4.1. Case selection justification

Qatar is selected as a critical case because it combines deep security dependence on the U.S. with significant economic integration with China, while also presenting itself as a neutral mediator. This dual embeddedness provides an ideal test of whether hedging can be sustained amid mounting great power competition (Ciorciari & Haacke,

2019; Kuik, 2021). Qatar's unique position justifies its analytical value for small-state theory: it hosts the U.S. Al Udeid Air Base and holds Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) status (Shear, 2022; Ulrichsen, 2020); it is China's second-largest LNG supplier, having signed record-long 27-year contracts (Mills & Dahan, 2023); and it has leveraged mediation in Afghanistan, Gaza, and Sudan to cultivate a reputation as a neutral broker (Steinberg, 2023).

4.2. Data sources

This study relies on a wide range of evidence to ensure analytical rigor through triangulation (Carter et al., 2014). Primary sources include official communiqués, speeches by senior leaders, bilateral strategic dialogue records, and published agreements such as LNG supply contracts and U.S.-Qatar defense accords. These provide direct insight into state preferences and institutional commitments.

Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed scholarship on hedging, neutrality, and Gulf politics, which establish the conceptual foundation and allow Qatar's behavior to be situated within broader theoretical debates. Complementing these are policy reports from institutions, which offer policy-relevant assessments of Qatar's foreign policy.

The research also draws on economic data from the WTO, USTR, and the Qatar Investment Authority, alongside detailed analysis of LNG contracts, to measure trade and investment flows with the U.S. and China. Finally, media sources—including Reuters, CNN, Al Jazeera, and The Diplomat—are used to track real-time developments and official statements. Together, these materials provide a comprehensive, multi-perspective evidence base for evaluating Qatar's strategic hedging.

4.3. Analytical framework

The study applies a structured, focused comparison (George & Bennett, 2005) across four core dimensions of Qatar's bilateral relations with the United States and China: (1) security and defense, (2) political and diplomatic relations, (3) economic and energy relations, and (4) soft power and cultural engagements. These dimensions capture the breadth of Qatar's interactions with both great powers while allowing systematic comparison.

Each dimension is analyzed through three theoretical lenses: realism, liberalism, and hedging theory. Realism highlights the logic of survival and alliance under anarchy; liberalism emphasizes interdependence and absolute gains; hedging theory conceptualizes insurance-seeking strategies under high uncertainty. By applying these perspectives in parallel, the study tests competing explanations and evaluates the distinct explanatory power of hedging theory in accounting for Qatar's dual engagement.

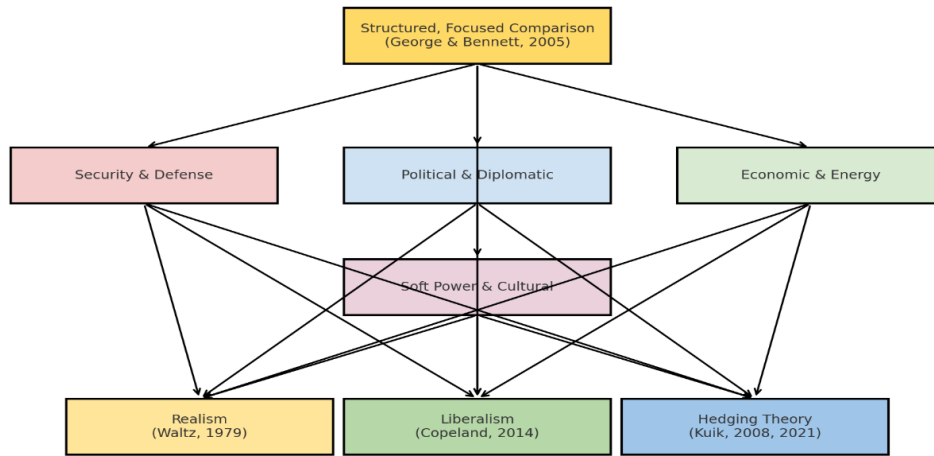


Figure 1. Analytical framework

4.4. Methods

To operationalize the research design, this study employs a multi-method qualitative approach that combines content analysis, process tracing, and discourse analysis. This triangulation ensures that Qatar's geopolitical strategy is captured both at the level of observable actions and the underlying causal mechanisms and narratives.

a) Content analysis of policy choices. The first method systematically catalogs and codes Qatar's agreements, initiatives, and strategic decisions into categories of *alignment*, *neutrality*, or *hedging behavior*. For example, Qatar's designation as a U.S. Major Non-NATO Ally exemplifies alignment, its cautious withdrawal from the 2019 UN letter defending China's Xinjiang policies reflects neutrality, while its simultaneous pursuit of LNG contracts with Sinopec (2022) and U.S.-based Golden Pass LNG investment illustrates hedging. Coding such actions across security, political, economic, and cultural domains allows for the identification of recurring behavioral patterns.

b) Process tracing of key episodes. Second, process tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2019) is applied to pivotal episodes that tested Qatar's balancing strategy. These include the 2017–2021 Gulf blockade, where Doha sought U.S. security backing while simultaneously deepening ties with China; the 2022 Ukraine war, when Qatar aligned with U.S.-European energy needs while preserving Chinese partnerships; and the Huawei 5G dilemma, where Qatar permitted limited Huawei participation despite U.S. concerns. By reconstructing these episodes, the study uncovers the causal mechanisms that inform Qatar's hedging behavior under pressure.

c) Discourse analysis of official rhetoric. Finally, discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) examines speeches, interviews, and official communiqués by Qatari leaders. Particular attention is paid to recurring themes, such as the assertion that “relations with one will not come at

the expense of the other” (Reuters, 2023a), and the consistent emphasis on multilateralism and dialogue as normative justifications for foreign policy choices. This method distinguishes between rhetorical neutrality and material hedging, revealing how Qatar frames its dual engagement to both domestic and international audiences.

Together, these three methods provide complementary insights: content analysis identifies patterns, process tracing uncovers causal dynamics, and discourse analysis interprets strategic narratives. Their combination ensures a robust, multidimensional understanding of Qatar’s strategy amid U.S.-China rivalry.

5. Discussion

5.1. Qatar’s bilateral relations with the US and China

5.1.1. Qatar–US relations: Security alliance and beyond

a) Security and military cooperation. Qatar’s relationship with the US is anchored in extensive defense cooperation dating back to the early 1990s. The 1992 Defense Cooperation Agreement formalized a partnership that gave Washington long-term access to Qatari facilities (Ulrichsen, 2020). At the core is Al Udeid Air Base, located outside Doha, which hosts the forward headquarters of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and the Combined Air Operations Center. Since 2003, Qatar has invested more than \$8 billion to expand and upgrade the base, underscoring the depth of its commitment (Katzman, 2022). Al Udeid has been indispensable for US operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the campaign against ISIS, serving as both a logistics hub and an air combat center.

In March 2022, President Joe Biden designated Qatar a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA), signaling that the bilateral security relationship had reached the level of America’s closest partnerships (Shear, 2022). MNNA status provides access to priority defense deliveries, cooperative research, and other advantages, placing Qatar alongside key US allies such as Japan, Australia, and Kuwait. The designation institutionalized what was already a deep reliance on US security guarantees.

The US also supplies Qatar with advanced weaponry and training. Deals include the \$12 billion purchase of F-15QA strike fighters and deliveries of Patriot air defense systems. Regular joint exercises and training programs integrate Qatari forces with US and NATO standards. In 2024, Doha and Washington renewed their defense cooperation agreement for another decade, ensuring the continuation of a U.S. military presence (CNN, 2024). Collectively, these arrangements make the U.S. alliance the cornerstone of Qatar’s national security strategy.

b) Political and diplomatic relations. Politically, Qatar and the US maintain a robust level of engagement. Since 2018, the US-Qatar Strategic Dialogue has convened annually, addressing cooperation in defense, counterterrorism, education, and energy sectors (Arab Center

for Research and Policy Studies, 2018). Qatar's diplomatic clout often complements US interests: Doha hosted multilateral talks that led to the 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, serving as a mediator between Washington and the Taliban. After Kabul fell in 2021, Qatar facilitated evacuations of Western and Afghan citizens and acted as a diplomatic interlocutor with the new Taliban regime, roles publicly commended by the United States (Milton & Elkahoul, 2024).

Qatar also partners with the US in counterterrorism efforts, hosting the regional headquarters of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition and sharing intelligence critical to joint operations (Kamrava, 2015). However, Qatar's foreign policy displays an independent streak—engaging with Islamist movements in some cases, and maintaining ties with Iran—occasionally generating tension with U.S. regional priorities (Roberts, 2017).

In the context of US-China rivalry, Qatar's political alignment has generally leaned West on global geopolitical crises. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Qatar supported international law and increased LNG exports to Europe, aligning with U.S. and European positions—while China stayed comparatively neutral (Alterman, 2024). Nevertheless, Doha retains its role as a mediator, holding dialogues with all parties, including Russia, demonstrating its balancing act in foreign policy.

c) Economic and energy ties. Economic ties between the US and Qatar are growing, though America is not yet Qatar's top trading partner. A major joint venture in this relationship is the Golden Pass LNG export project in Texas: QatarEnergy controls 70% and ExxonMobil 30% of the venture. The roughly \$10 billion facility in Sabine Pass is expected to begin exporting later this year, providing LNG to Asia and Europe (Gardner, 2025).

The Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) is also significantly increasing its US investments. As of mid-2024, QIA confirmed that around 90% of its portfolio is concentrated in the U.S., Europe, and Qatar; it has pledged to at least double its annual U.S. investments over the next decade. This follows an earlier commitment to invest USD 500 billion in the U.S. economy over ten years (Reuters, 2025a).

Trade between the two countries remains moderate. USTR reported U.S.-Qatar goods and services trade at approximately USD 11.5 billion in 2024, with goods trade at about USD 5.6 billion and services around USD 5.9 billion. Key US exports to Qatar include machinery, aircraft, and services; Qatar's exports are dominated by LNG and petrochemicals (USTR, 2024).

5.1.2. Qatar-China relations: Economic partnership and diversification

a) Diplomatic and political relations. Qatar first established formal diplomatic relations with China in 1988, but bilateral ties deepened substantially during the 21st century. A watershed moment came in

November 2014, when China and Qatar upgraded their relationship to a “strategic partnership”, making Qatar the first GCC country to do so with Beijing (Chaziza, 2020). This development took place during Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani’s state visit to China and signaled mutual aspirations for long-term cooperation across trade, investment, energy, finance, security, and cultural sectors.

Since then, high-level exchanges have become routine. President Xi Jinping and Emir Tamim have met on multiple occasions— during the 2019 state visit and at the first China-Arab States Summit in 2022, among other meetings— underscoring diplomatic warmth and political trust (Niu & Wang, 2024).

On human rights issues that draw Western criticism, Qatar has generally adopted a cautious or neutral stance. Most notably, in mid-2019 Qatar withdrew its signature from a joint letter at the UN that defended China’s policies in Xinjiang, choosing instead to maintain mediation and neutrality rather than align with criticism (Hassanein, 2019).

Economically, Qatar has embraced Chinese financial integration and currency cooperation. During 2015, Doha opened the first renminbi clearing center in the Middle East and later agreed to significant financial cooperation under China’s BRI (Rakhmat, 2015). Such steps reflect not only economic opportunity but political readiness to trust China with influence in the region.

These political and diplomatic moves illustrate Qatar’s strategy of cultivating robust ties with China, not merely for trade, but as part of a calibrated foreign policy: one that balances Western alignment with pragmatism in its relations with Beijing.

b) Economic and energy cooperation. Economic interdependence forms the core of Qatar-China relations, which has expanded rapidly in the past decade. China is the world’s largest energy importer, while Qatar is a leading exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG). This complementarity has made Beijing one of Doha’s most important partners. By 2022, Qatar ranked as China’s second-largest LNG supplier, providing about 18 million tons, or 26.6% of Chinese LNG imports (CGEP, 2023). In value terms, China accounted for nearly 20% of Qatar’s exports by 2024, more than any other country (WTO, 2024).

A turning point came in November 2022, when QatarEnergy and Sinopec signed a 27-year LNG agreement, the longest in Qatar’s history. The contract guarantees China 4 million tons annually through the 2050s (Reuters, 2022a). A second 27-year deal with CNPC followed in June 2023, covering another 4 million tons annually. Sinopec also took a 5% equity stake in one LNG train of the North Field East expansion (Mills & Dahan, 2023). These long-term contracts secure China’s energy supply and Qatar’s market access for decades.

Chinese involvement extends beyond hydrocarbons. For the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the China Railway Construction Corporation built

Lusail Stadium, while other firms contributed to Stadium 974 and supplied electric buses via Yutong. Such projects symbolized China's visible role in Qatar's development.

Finance adds another layer. Since 2015, Doha has hosted the Middle East's first renminbi clearing center and signed a 35 billion yuan swap agreement with Beijing (Hoh, 2019). Chinese banks, such as ICBC, operate in Qatar, while Beijing granted Doha an \$8.3 billion QFII¹ quota in 2015—the first in the Middle East. Moreover, trade flows are two-way. By 2023, 15% of Qatar's imports came from China, including consumer goods, electronics, machinery, and construction materials. From energy to finance and everyday products, Chinese influence is now embedded across Qatar's economy.

c) Security and military contacts. Security and military contacts between Qatar and China are modest compared to Qatar's ties with the US, but some noteworthy developments have occurred. In December 2017, Qatar paraded the Chinese SY-400 short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) system during its National Day celebrations, revealing what analysts believe to be BP-12A missiles packaged in SY-400 transporter-erector launchers (Eshel, 2017; Mitzer & Oliemans, 2021). This marked Qatar's first public display of advanced Chinese missile hardware, and was a diversification of its arms sources and a symbolic assertion of strategic autonomy.

The military relationship also includes counterterrorism dialogue. In 2017, Qatar and China signed an agreement to cooperate on counterterrorism measures, signaling former security dialogue beyond strictly military hardware (Ramani, 2017). However, China has no bases or permanent troops in Qatar, and Chinese arms remain a small component of Qatar's overall arsenal.

Militarily, ties are largely symbolic and limited: occasional naval port calls by Chinese vessels in Doha, training seminars for Qatari officers in China, and inclusion of Qatar in regional forums proposed by China. In sum, while China's security footprint in Qatar remains minimal, these developments point to a gradually deepening military engagement that complements Doha's foreign policy strategy of maintaining hedged relationships.

d) Diplomacy and soft power. Qatar and China have developed cultural and educational ties as part of their soft power exchange. Since 2018, China and Qatar have maintained reciprocal visa-free travel arrangements, allowing citizens to travel for tourism, cultural exchange, and business without prior visas (Ali, 2025; Obaidullah & Hossain, 2025). Direct flights between Doha and multiple Chinese cities have

1. Qualified Foreign Investor License

strengthened tourism and business travel, and Chinese language programs have appeared in some Qatari schools.

Exchange programs have also increased: Doha hosts a branch of the Confucius Institute to support Chinese language teaching, and the Chinese expatriate community has grown in line with infrastructure and development projects tied to Chinese investment. Media cooperation has expanded as well—China Global Television Network (CGTN) has produced profiles on Qatar and some content sharing take place with local media, enhancing public diplomacy visibility (ibid).

Altogether, these cultural and educational initiatives complement the strong economic and political relationship between Qatar and China. China has become indispensable to Qatar's energy strategy and economic diversification, while Qatar serves as both a steady energy exporter and a stable partner in China's BRI.

5.2. Strategic hedging or neutrality: Evidence and analysis

Qatar's engagement with the US and China exemplifies strategic hedging. Evidence from Doha's policies and statements shows it balances ties with both powers, avoiding outright alignment. While presented as neutrality, it is active neutrality—deliberate choices to extract benefits, preserve flexibility, and maintain favor with rival global actors.

a) Official rhetoric—“Not at the Expense of the Other”. Qatar's leaders have explicitly articulated their desire to balance relations with Washington and Beijing. In August 2023, Qatar's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani made explicit statements balancing Doha's relations with Washington and Beijing. He affirmed, “Qatar is balancing its relationships with both the United States and China and one link does not damage the other.” He added, “none of our relations with any specific country will be at the expense of another,” (Reuters, 2023a). When asked whether China's expanding defense sales to the Middle East could harm US ties, he reiterated that Qatar welcomes cooperation with all partners while preserving existing alliances. This rhetoric articulates the essence of strategic hedging: not choosing camps, but maintaining relationships without sacrificing one for another. The consistency of such statements in official speeches and interviews underscores that this balancing is not accidental but a deliberate foreign-policy posture.

b) Energy diplomacy as a balancing tool. Energy diplomacy underscores Qatar's hedging strategy. In November 2022, QatarEnergy signed a record 27-year LNG deal with Sinopec to supply 4 million tonnes annually, its longest such contract, even as U.S.-China rivalry intensified. Rather than defer to Washington, Doha secured a reliable Asian market, while continuing major ventures with American firms, such as the Golden Pass LNG project in Texas with ExxonMobil (Gardner, 2025). In June 2023, QatarEnergy concluded another 27-year

LNG agreement with CNPC, also for 4 million tonnes/ year, coupled with a 5% equity stake in the North Field East expansion. These contracts lock in Chinese demand for decades while Qatar simultaneously boosted supplies to Europe after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Qatar's Energy Minister Saad al-Kaabi emphasized reliability and neutrality, rejecting politicization of energy trade (*Reuters*, 2022a). By diversifying customers across East and West, Qatar avoids overdependence and strengthens its autonomy.

c) Technology and Infrastructure. In telecommunications and critical infrastructure, Qatar has pursued a strategy of balancing US and Chinese involvement. While major Western vendors like Nokia and Ericsson feature in Qatar's 5G rollout, the government also permitted Huawei's participation, notably through Vodafone Qatar, despite US allegations of security risks from Chinese vendors (Soliman, 2022). This decision reflects Qatar's calculated hedging: acquiring advanced technology from Huawei for cost or capability reasons while preserving its security alignment with Washington.

A report described a "5G dilemma" in the Gulf: governments face trade-offs between US security concerns and economic incentives tied to Chinese tech. Doha's approach during the lead-up to the 2022 FIFA World Cup illustrates this balance—allowing Huawei a role sufficient to ensure robust service deployment without triggering sanctions or jeopardizing intelligence cooperation (Calabrese, 2019).

Beyond telecoms, Qatar has invited Chinese and Western firms into infrastructure and energy projects, ensuring neither side gains dominance. For example, critical public works contracts for the Al-Kharsaah solar plant and other infrastructure were awarded through competitive bids involving Chinese and non-Chinese contractors (Sim & Griffiths, 2024). By keeping both superpowers invested, Qatar maintains flexibility and avoids overdependence on either China or the US.

d) Diplomatic posture and mediation. Qatar's diplomatic activism often serves as a form of hedging on the global stage. Doha has built a reputation as a mediator who maintains lines of communication with all sides. For example, Qatar hosts the Taliban's political office (since 2013) and played a central role in the U.S.-Taliban talks culminating in the 2020 Doha Agreement, while simultaneously engaging with Sudanese factions and facilitating humanitarian dialogues (Salami, 2021). These roles require perceived neutrality.

Qatar's voting behavior at the United Nations and participation in multilateral forums further underscore this approach. Doha typically refrains from joining US or Chinese blocs that take adversarial stances; instead, it opts for consensus positions, in line with the Non-Aligned Movement's norms (Steinberg, 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Qatar approved China's

Sinopharm vaccine and accepted Western vaccine manufacturers, signaling its willingness to engage all sources for public health (Liu et al., 2022). In conflicts such as the 2021 Israel-Hamas clashes and the 2022 Ukraine war, Qatar offered mediation and aid without taking a hardline side, aiming to maintain trust and open channels with both allies and adversaries. These cumulative practices suggest that Qatar's foreign policy is structured around strategic hedging—preserving its US alliance while cultivating parallel engagements that ensure diplomatic versatility and resilience.

e) Avoiding entrapment and abandonment. Qatar's foreign policy aims to avoid the twin perils of entrapment and abandonment. By not fully siding with either the U.S. or China, Doha reduces the risk of being compelled into conflicts through alliance obligations. For example, amid U.S.-China tensions over regional issues like Taiwan or the South China Sea, Qatar has refrained from vocal or policy commitments, maintaining a low-profile non-alignment in Asia-Pacific matters (Havlová, 2020).

Conversely, Qatar's deep economic and diplomatic ties with both powers protect against abandonment. During the 2017–2021 Gulf diplomatic crisis—when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a blockade—Qatar was isolated regionally. Yet Washington did not enforce all demands or permanently abandon Doha; concurrently, China continued trade relations and maintained diplomatic engagement (Havlová, 2020; Kabbani, 2021). This continued relationship with China provided Qatar with an alternative outlet for trade and partnerships when regional support was withdrawn.

These experiences reinforce Qatar's hedging instinct: cultivating multiple powerful partners so that no single one can dictate terms or leave Doha exposed in moments of tension. By preserving credible ties to both great powers, Qatar positions itself to navigate strategic competition without being locked into one camp or left stranded when alliances shift.

f) Neutrality vs. Hedging in branding. Qatar often publicly emphasizes neutrality and non-alignment in its diplomatic rhetoric, stressing multilateralism, dialogue, and rejecting binary great-power confrontations. For instance, when global forums convene on climate change or security, Qatari officials routinely caution against the Middle East becoming a proxy theater in US-China rivalry—urging cooperation rather than (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Qatar, 2022). In 2021, Doha hosted the Qatar Climate Change Conference where leaders from diverse states, including China and the US, participated and underscored the importance of collaborative responses over geopolitical competition (Tahir et al., 2021).

Yet, Qatar's neutrality is qualified. Militarily and institutionally, it remains deeply integrated with US defense frameworks. At the same time, Doha has strengthened economic and diplomatic ties with

China—in trade, investment, and institutional partnerships—so that its relationships are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing. This “aligned neutrality” reflects hedging: leaning toward the US in security while keeping China engaged economically.

Concrete displays of this hybrid posture emerged during moments of global tension. In 2022, as Europe faced an energy crisis and Ukraine's conflict impacted global fuel markets, President Biden publicly thanked Qatar for helping with energy supply and facilitating evacuations from Afghanistan, illustrating U.S. reliance on Doha (*Arab News*, 2022). Meanwhile, China has lauded Qatar's role in regional diplomacy and embraced it as a partner in initiatives like the Belt and Road.

5.3. *Risks and limitations of Qatar's strategy*

While Qatar's hedging strategy has yielded significant benefits, it is not without risks and constraints. As great power competition intensifies, Qatar faces challenges in maintaining its balancing act. This section analyzes the key risks and limitations inherent in Qatar's approach of dual alignment:

a) Shrinking strategic space if rivalry escalates. The foremost risk for Qatar's hedging strategy is that a worsening US-China confrontation could sharply reduce the ambiguity and room needed for dual engagement. Hedging thrives under moderate competition; once rivalry polarizes, small states may face demands to pick sides. Already, Washington has quietly pressured Gulf states to exclude Huawei from sensitive networks, a mild form of entrapment pressure in the tech domain (Cornwell, 2019).

If US-China relations intensified—over crises like Taiwan, or strict bifurcation of financial systems—Qatar may be forced to choose between core security ties and economic partners. For instance, the US Clean Network Initiative and warnings to Gulf states about Chinese tech illustrate how US expectations are tightening (Soliman, 2022). Moreover, the 2017-2021 Gulf diplomatic crisis provides a precedent: when Doha was blockaded, its US protection was ambiguous. Qatar leaned more heavily into trade with China and other alternative partnerships to withstand the pressure (Kinninmont, 2024). Should future US conditions require cutting off Chinese relationships in order to maintain arms or intelligence sharing, Qatar might confront a lose-lose scenario: betray key markets or undermine its security guarantees. Thus, the insurance offered by hedging could unravel if the two poles begin demanding exclusive loyalty.

b) Perception of dual loyalty or distrust. Hedging can invite suspicion from both great powers about Qatar's ultimate loyalties. There is a fine line between maintaining good relations with everyone and being viewed as unreliable. Qatar's hosting of a major US air base might lead Chinese observers to see Doha firmly in America's camp

should US–China conflict erupts. Conversely, some in Washington are wary of Gulf states’ engagements with Beijing. It was asserted that “the alliance of Qatar and China is dangerous to the US”, reflecting concern that Doha’s growing economic and strategic ties with Beijing may undermine US interests (Ecanow & Burnham, 2025).

Though not reflecting official US policy, such narratives show how quickly suspicion can arise. To mitigate this, Qatar must maintain transparency, stressing that Chinese ties are largely economic and not oriented toward undermining its American commitments. Walking this tightrope also means avoiding actions that could trigger distrust—such as deep intelligence cooperation with Beijing or allowing Chinese naval facilities. While Doha has so far managed to compartmentalize ties, any misstep or scandal could amplify U.S. concerns or cause a backlash in Washington.

c) Security reliance asymmetry. Despite hedging, Qatar’s security dependence on the US is substantial; China does not currently offer comparable guarantees. Under the US–Qatar Defense Cooperation Agreement, Qatar hosts American forces (including at Al Udeid), derives significant military support, intelligence sharing, and protection from Washington. In contrast, China’s relationship centers largely on economic, not military, cooperation. This asymmetry suggests that in a crisis (for example, heightened Iranian threats), Qatar would likely lean on U.S. hard power even if China urged diplomacy. A recent example that underscores this imbalance is the 2025 missile attack by Iran on Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar—while Qatar condemned the attack and intercepted missiles, its reliance on U.S. defense architecture for protection was evident and widely reported (Mills et al., 2025).

Furthermore, US officials and strategic analysts often expect that their alliances entail certain expectations of loyalty. If future US arms or intelligence sharing became contingent on Doha distancing itself from China in certain domains, Qatar might face pressure to conform. China likely recognizes this dynamic; pushing too hard could risk Beijing losing access altogether. Managing this imbalance—one partner supplying existential security versus the other providing economic opportunity—is delicate. Qatar’s strategy involves quietly tilting toward US security imperatives when core interests are at stake, even while maintaining economic engagement with China to leverage alternatives and avoid appearing entirely aligned with one side.

d) Regional geopolitical shifts. Qatar’s hedging strategy is shaped not just by US–China rivalry but also by Gulf dynamics. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, its larger neighbors and occasional rivals, are deepening cooperation with Beijing in ways that could alter regional norms. US intelligence assessments indicate that Saudi Arabia has received Chinese assistance in producing solid-propellant ballistic missiles, raising alarms in Washington (Cohen, 2021). Riyadh’s partnership with Huawei to host a cloud region reflects its readiness to adopt Chinese

technology despite US pressure (*Reuters*, 2023b). Such developments could indirectly pressure Qatar: if the US reacts by privileging “loyal” partners like Qatar for security guarantees, Doha might gain—but also face sharper scrutiny of its Chinese ties.

If, conversely, Gulf states collectively limit Chinese roles in defense in exchange for firmer American commitments, Qatar would need to follow suit, narrowing its hedging flexibility. On the other hand, a decline in US regional engagement could force Doha to lean more heavily on China or others, none of whom can replicate US security guarantees. Regional shifts, therefore, can amplify the risks of hedging by constraining Qatar's room to maneuver.

e) Hedging efficacy and opportunity cost. Hedging also carries the risk of missed opportunities. By avoiding full alignment, Qatar may find itself sidelined from initiatives, where great powers reward clear loyalty. For instance, US strategic projects such as the Abraham Accords (normalization with Israel) involved the UAE and Bahrain but not Qatar, partly reflecting Doha's different positioning (Vakil & Quilliam, 2023). Similarly, US Indo-Pacific economic frameworks may not prioritize Qatar if it is seen as ambivalent or peripheral. On the Chinese side, Qatar's more cautious approach—allowing Huawei a role in 5G but not to the same extent as the UAE or Saudi Arabia—means Beijing may direct its most lucrative tech projects elsewhere.

Another limitation is Qatar's small-state capacity. Deepening ties with both Washington and Beijing simultaneously requires considerable diplomatic, financial, and administrative bandwidth. There are opportunity costs: if Qatar were fully in the U.S. camp, it might secure more advanced weaponry or firmer guarantees; if it leaned decisively to China, perhaps more investment would flow. By splitting the difference, Doha forfeits some marginal benefits of wholehearted alignment. Yet, Qatar appears to judge that preserving autonomy outweighs those potential gains. Hedging, then, substitutes one risk (major-power retaliation) with another (minor dissatisfaction on both sides).

6. Conclusion and policy implications

Building on the evidence above, Qatar can operationalize a security-anchored hedge through five measures: First, codify vendor diversification in telecoms and critical infrastructure (e.g., multi-vendor or Open RAN architectures) with independent security audits. Second, firewall Chinese-linked commercial projects from U.S. defense cooperation via legal instruments (ring-fenced SPVs), data localization, third-party certifications, and periodic disclosure to partners. Third, insure against Red Sea and Strait-of-Hormuz disruptions by expanding rerouting capacity, bunkering/repair options, and war-risk insurance pools, coupled with LNG portfolio balancing: long-term Asian offtake plus Atlantic flexibility via Golden Pass and short-term swaps. Fourth,

adopt a public red-lines framework for dual-use tech (no PLA-linked vendors in core networks; limits on high-risk surveillance exports), aligned with US and EU standards to preserve intelligence and supply-chain access. Fifth, leverage Doha's mediation to extract side-payments that underwrite neutrality rhetoric e.g., targeted aid, energy swap lines, and export-credit guarantees, while committing to transparent compliance reporting. Cross-cutting enablers include strengthening sanctions-compliance units, stress-testing financial exposures to secondary sanctions, and expanding joint training at Al Udeid to signal credible deterrence.

Together, these steps preserve market optionality in Asia without eroding U.S. security ties, raise resilience to maritime shocks, and clarify thresholds that keep hedging sustainable as great-power rivalry hardens, and to reassure key external stakeholders.

Qatar's geopolitical strategy amid the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China is best conceptualized as *strategic hedging*: a calibrated mix of security alignment and economic diversification that enables Doha to maximize gains from both powers without committing exclusively to either. This research has demonstrated that Qatar is neither purely neutral nor firmly aligned with one camp. Instead, it pursues a nuanced "in-between" approach—anchoring its security in the U.S. alliance while simultaneously deepening economic and diplomatic ties with Beijing. Such a strategy reflects both structural constraints and deliberate statecraft. For a small but wealthy and vulnerable state, hedging functions as insurance against uncertainty by diversifying great power relationships.

Empirically, Qatar's behavior aligns with this logic. On one hand, it maintains one of the closest U.S. security partnerships in the region, hosting Al Udeid Air Base and receiving Major Non-NATO Ally status—decisions rooted in realist concerns with regime survival and deterrence. On the other, Qatar has elevated its ties with China to a strategic partnership, becoming Beijing's leading LNG supplier and supporting initiatives like the Belt and Road. Doha's leadership repeatedly stresses that "none of our relations with any specific country will be at the expense of another", a succinct articulation of hedging. Whether in energy, technology, or diplomacy, Qatar has compartmentalized its engagements: long-term LNG deals with Sinopec alongside investment in U.S. LNG projects; Chinese 5G networks alongside NATO defense integration; mediation with groups from the Taliban to Russia while also aligning with U.S. counterterrorism priorities.

Theoretical insights affirm the rationality of this course. Hedging theory emphasizes that under high uncertainty and high stakes, small states adopt contradictory policies to mitigate risk. Qatar fits this profile: uncertainty about U.S. regional commitment, China's global rise, and regional instability pushes Doha to avoid binary choices. The

strategy has yielded dividends—hard security from the U.S., secure energy markets in Asia, and enhanced global status through diplomacy and soft power. The 2022 FIFA World Cup showcased this equilibrium: Chinese-built infrastructure, U.S. and European security support, and attendance by leaders from both East and West.

Yet hedging is not cost-free. Its viability depends on great power competition remaining below a threshold of outright hostility. Were U.S.-China rivalry to harden into a Cold War binary, Qatar's room to maneuver would shrink sharply. The U.S. could pressure allies to exclude Huawei from networks or restrict energy exports to China, forcing Doha into difficult trade-offs. Conversely, China could question Qatar's neutrality due to its indispensable U.S. base-hosting role. Thus far, both powers tolerate Doha's duality: Washington prioritizes security cooperation, and Beijing prioritizes energy. But growing suspicion on either side could destabilize this equilibrium.

Looking ahead, Qatar faces several tests. First, technological bifurcation: decisions over 5G, AI, and digital infrastructure will increasingly be politicized. Qatar has so far adopted a balanced vendor approach, but sharper U.S. pressure could force recalibration. Second, regional dynamics: if neighbors like Saudi Arabia tilt decisively toward one camp, Qatar may face indirect pressure to align. Third, domestic legitimacy: Qatar must manage the reputational risks of appearing indifferent to Muslim issues in China, while sustaining its global brand as a mediator.

From a scholarly standpoint, Qatar enriches comparative debates on small-state strategies. It demonstrates that hedging is not confined to Southeast Asia but is emerging as a hallmark of Gulf geopolitics in the 2020s. Qatar illustrates that small states are not passive victims of great power rivalry but can actively leverage it for autonomy and influence. Its strategy might best be termed "aligned neutrality"—militarily tied to the U.S., but economically and diplomatically open to China. This "managed neutrality" is less about abstaining from alignment than about orchestrating multiple alignments to maximize resilience.

Hence, Qatar has so far navigated U.S.-China rivalry with remarkable agility, securing benefits from both sides and avoiding stark choices. Strategic hedging has enabled it to punch above its weight internationally, balancing alliances with autonomy. However, its sustainability hinges on the trajectory of great power relations. If rivalry escalates into direct confrontation, Qatar's space to hedge will shrink, exposing the limits of small-state maneuvering. Until then, Qatar's careful balancing—what might be called "choosing not to choose"—remains its best option. For scholars and policymakers alike, Qatar offers a compelling case of how small states can survive and thrive amid systemic rivalry by steering deliberately between giants.

Conflict of interest

The author declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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