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Evaluating Western Europe as a part of Qatar's soft power  
policy; focusing on France, Germany, and the United  
Kingdom.

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## Introduction

Despite its young history as a country, Qatar has quickly risen from being a minnow in the Gulf to a position of considerable power and influence, both regionally and internationally. Assorted studies have charted Qatar's growth and experience navigating instability in the Gulf, explaining how the country has outperformed its small stature despite being limited in traditional measures of power.<sup>1</sup> However, there has been a dearth of academic focus on Qatar's interactions with Western Europe, despite their considerable importance. As such, this research will investigate the relationship between Western Europe and Qatari soft power policy, focusing on France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. This study will examine Qatar's activities in each country along economic, cultural, political, and security themes, before comparing them to identify trends and differences.

Through this, the myth of Qatar's "*maverick foreign policy*" is dispelled.<sup>2</sup> Instead, this study finds Qatar's foreign policy to be highly tactical and tailored to the environments it operates in. Whilst there are clear trends across all three countries, such as investing in important domestic industries or acquiring prestigious and eye-catching assets, it is evident that Qatari policymakers are aware of which approaches best fit the circumstances of each target country. It is hoped that this study will not only provide further clarity on the specific foreign policy approach of Qatar as a key international actor but will also generate a more contemporary understanding of how "small states" can exercise soft power to further their international standing.<sup>3</sup>

## Theoretical Perspectives

The concept of 'soft power' has been widely discussed since Joseph Nye coined the term in his 1990 book *'Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power'*, yet it remains contested. Bakalov examines this contention in his literature review, highlighting criticisms of Nye's concept and arguing that much of the analysis has been divided between theoretical and case-specific approaches.<sup>4</sup> He laments that the two approaches possess the ability to complement each other and yet they have so far been unable to bridge this gap.

Rothman represents one such critic of Nye on the theoretical side, arguing that hard and soft power should be understood as differing ends of the same "*continuum*" rather than distinct concepts.<sup>5</sup> Rothman contends that the key difference between the two is the utilization of "*physical coercion*" as part of hard power.<sup>6</sup> Bilgin and Eliş are critical of both hard and soft power understandings.<sup>7</sup> Focusing specifically on Nye's concept of soft power, they argue that he fails to adequately explain how the attraction, central to driving soft power, is generated by a country. They also contend that Nye underplays the historical conditions which have allowed Western Cultures to be more 'attractive,' ignoring the colonial legacy which enshrines U.S. soft power.

As the father of soft power, Nye revisits his famous concept in the wake of 21st century developments.<sup>8</sup> He defines power as "*the capacity to do things*" and "*the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants*".<sup>9</sup> For Nye, soft and hard power are distinguished by the relationship between actors. For example, compelling a state to behave in a certain way represents traditional hard power, whereas attracting a state is an example of soft power. Importantly, Nye argues that when

deception is used, it becomes “*sharp power*” because the target’s agency has been manipulated.<sup>10</sup>

Nye also responds to criticism, rejecting claims that his concept is inherently based on Western values, and suggests that any feeling of this rests in the context of his writing. He argues that soft power factors are dependent on the actors involved, as “*attraction rests in the eye of the beholder*”.<sup>11</sup> In ‘*The Future of Power*’, Nye writes that soft power can be generated from “*culture*”, “*political values*”, and “*foreign policy*”.<sup>12</sup> However, his concept alone fails to adequately explain the rapid expansion of Qatar’s attraction, making necessary the use of another theoretical concept.

Kamrava challenges existing conceptions of soft power, suggesting that they fail to capture Qatar’s behaviour.<sup>13</sup> He identifies it as “*subtle power*,” a combination of “*diplomacy, marketing, [and] domestic politics*” all achieved through the utilization of the country’s vast natural wealth. Kamrava argues that obtaining security through military alliances is crucial for small states, as it establishes the foundations to safely pursue the growth of international influence.<sup>14</sup> Qatar achieves this condition primarily through its relationships with the United States, and to a lesser extent, Iran, and Türkiye. Once security has been established, Kamrava asserts that the process of achieving “*prestige*” through international marketing efforts can begin. This is a pattern seen across the Gulf which involves high-profile investments in tourism, sport, and infrastructure, all designed to furnish a positive view of the country across the world.<sup>15</sup>

Yet Kamrava contends that branding alone is insufficient for building a positive reputation, it must also be accompanied by behaviour that reaffirms the country’s

status as a “*global good citizen*.”<sup>16</sup> Qatar has achieved this through aggressive diplomacy, creating a privileged position in conflict mediation and establishing itself as a positive international force. Kamrava highlights that the most key component of subtle power is wealth, specifically the influence generated by significant and long-term international investments synonymous with Qatar.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Kamrava’s concept of ‘*subtle power*’ is designed for Qatar, making it a useful tool for this essay. However, it also meshes well with the behaviour of other Gulf countries and provides a blueprint for small states that might hope to elevate their international standing.

It is also essential to examine the concept of ‘*Hedging*,’ a fundamental trait of small-state foreign policy. Lake describes hedging as a “*form of insurance against opportunism*,” though “*Like actual opportunism, it is costly to the state*.”<sup>18</sup> This suggests a small state will hedge against the possibility of a partner behaving detrimentally. Cheng-Chwee, pointing to its financial origins, describes hedging as the middle road between “*balancing*” and “*bandwagoning*.”<sup>19</sup> Hedging involves planning for multiple eventualities to limit risk. Qatar’s diplomacy with both the United States and Iran, themselves adversarial powers, exemplifies this approach.

## Overview of Franco-Qatari Relations

Diplomatic relations between Qatar and France began following Qatari independence from Britain in 1971, with France immediately recognising their sovereignty.<sup>20</sup> Since 1972, both countries have operated embassies and maintained healthy diplomatic ties.<sup>21</sup> French cooperation with Qatar extends further, to 1936, with French multinational



corporation [MNC] ‘TotalEnergies SE’ playing a crucial role in the initial development and extraction of Qatar’s oil and gas resources.<sup>22</sup> The success of this industry has been central to Qatar’s modern development. The income generated by the oil and gas revenues has allowed for the modernisation of the state, whilst also being a vital resource for their soft power policy. Given this shared history, it is unsurprising to see the interconnected nature of Qatar and France’s relationship.

Cooperation has been increasingly bilateral since the 1990s, thanks to economic liberalisation orchestrated by Sheikh Hamad after 1995. This tightening relationship is demonstrated by France being third only to the UK and USA in the amount of foreign direct investment [FDI] that it receives from Qatar. By 2023 this had totalled €25bn, comprising around 10% of Qatar’s global total.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, cooperation between the two countries spans issues of economic, political, cultural, scientific, academic, and military importance.<sup>24</sup>

## Qatari Soft-Power Initiatives with France

A theme of Qatari investments into Europe has been their ambition, especially for a country of Qatar’s size. Kamrava notes they have targeted “*some of the oldest and biggest companies in markets from Britain and France*” and beyond.<sup>25</sup> It is evident that establishing deep economic and symbolic ties is a central part of the QIA’s investment strategy.

Within each country, patterns of investment are evident, with Qatari investment in France being focused on “*tourism, construction, and luxury*.”<sup>26</sup> As such, this section will examine the flows of Qatari FDI into France along economic, cultural, security, and political

dimensions, whilst also taking note of reciprocating French activity.

Franco-Qatari relations are significantly lucrative for both economies, with the value of Qatari exports to France in 2021 exceeding €850m, mostly hydrocarbon exports.<sup>27</sup> This is only likely to grow, as TotalEnergies inked a 27-year deal in 2023 to purchase 3.5m tons of LNG annually from the Qatar government.<sup>28</sup>

The relationship is equally lucrative for France, as 42 Qatari-owned companies operate across the country [as of 2022]. This economic activity sustains around 70,000 jobs and contributes over €3bn annually to the French economy.<sup>29</sup> Qatar has demonstrated its individual importance to France, outstripping all other Gulf nations with FDI totalling over €5bn between 2001-2021.<sup>30</sup>

Qatar has focused on tourism in France as a key avenue for economic diversification.<sup>31</sup> To this end, Qatar has purchased several luxury hotels across France through Katara Hospitality, a company owned by the QIF.<sup>32</sup> This has been further assisted by their cooperation with Accor, a French hospitality MNC with QIF investment, that has handled various lucrative contracts including the management of hotel services during the 2022 Qatar World Cup.<sup>33</sup> Former French President Nicholas Sarkozy, attributed with accelerating Franco-Qatari relations, also sits on Accor’s board.<sup>34</sup> This demonstrates the economic weight and political influence that Qatar’s investments have been able to generate.

The line between Qatari economic and cultural investments in France is blurred, exemplified their 2012 purchase of football team Paris St. Germain [PSG]. Having spent over €1.5bn on transfers alone, PSG is now the most successful team in France and one of the biggest in



the world.<sup>35</sup> The prize of PSG has been the legitimacy and influence that it has afforded Qatar in French and Global sports. The chairman of Qatar Sports Investment [QSi – the sports wing of the QIF], Nasser Al-Khelaifi, sits on the executive committee of UEFA and is viewed as a key figure within European football.<sup>36</sup>

Qatari investment in French sports extends to the media, where the creation of beIN Sport in 2012 saw them aggressively purchase broadcasting rights to a plethora of French and European sports. The link between beIN Sports and PSG is overt, with Al-Khelaifi being the public face of both companies.<sup>37</sup> Their origins trace back to a now infamous 2010 meeting between then-President Sarkozy and Sheikh Khalifa. It is alleged that this meeting laid the foundation for Qatari investment into PSG and beIN, reciprocated by a Qatar Airways purchase of 50 Airbus planes. French FIFA delegate Michel Platini claimed, “*It was clear Sarkozy wanted him to vote for Qatar to host the World Cup.*”<sup>38</sup> While disputed, it’s clear that Qatar’s investments in French sport have expanded its influence in France and Europe.

Historically, Franco-Qatari relations have been supported by security ties. In 1980 Qatar purchased 15 Mirage F1 aircraft from French manufacturer Dassault and has signed various defence pacts since 1994.<sup>39</sup> Other high-profile deals include a 2015 purchase of 24 Rafale Jets, increased by 12 more in 2017.<sup>40</sup> In 2018 Qatar also purchased 28 NH90 Military Helicopters from French company Airbus, leading French Armed Forces Minister Parly to describe it as a “vital” part of French foreign policy.<sup>41</sup>

The importance of their relationship with France has grown, especially after Israeli objections blocked their purchase of American jets in 2023, highlighting the

need to foster additional alliances.<sup>42</sup> Around 80% of Qatar’s military equipment is French, demonstrating the importance of this relationship to both countries.<sup>43</sup> France has also played a central role in the training of Qatar’s security forces, notably for the 2022 World Cup, but also through various “bilateral military exercises and training” as part of a commitment to combat global terror.<sup>44</sup> This cooperation, combined with Qatar’s consistent procurement of French military equipment, represents how security investments have sustained political cooperation between the two states across changing political climates.

Qatar has significantly grown its international influence through conflict mediation, assisting France on several missions. In 2008, Qatar helped curtail a 16-month political conflict in Lebanon where France, the Arab League, and the UN had failed.<sup>45</sup> The situation repeated itself in 2023 when Qatar assisted French mediation with Hezbollah.<sup>46</sup> Qatar’s reputation for conflict mediation has grown its international influence, and proved valuable in its relationship with France.

The political dimension of Qatar’s LNG exports is also significant, as they represent a more attractive and stable partner for countries such as France, Italy, or Belgium, who are all seeking to diversify imports from Russia.<sup>47</sup> It is no surprise that the TotalEnergies deal with Qatar was signed in the aftermath of reignited Russian aggression with Ukraine in 2022.

This links to the security element, as LNG deals have allowed Qatar to facilitate trade for military equipment, including the 2017 deal worth \$14bn for jets and other weaponry. Qatari investments and business dealings in France go hand in hand with the political influence that they receive,



demonstrating the importance of their soft-power policy.

## Franco-Qatari Relations

Qatari investments in France directly target key economic sectors. For example, their investments in tourism and hospitality through companies like Katara or Accor are predicated on France's position as the world's primary tourist destination.<sup>48</sup> By tapping into French expertise, Qatar can further its goal of economic diversification away from the energy market.<sup>49</sup>

Qatar's focus on acquiring prestigious brands is clear, owing luxurious hotels, fashion labels like Balmain and Valentino, or European powerhouse PSG.<sup>50</sup> Whilst all these investments carry financial advantages, the key benefit relates to Qatari soft power. By taking ownership of these iconic brands, Qatar is legitimized as a global force and invited to further negotiations across the world.<sup>51</sup> This represents a fundamental aspect of soft power according to Nye, as Qatar can trade its investment appeal for political and military support.<sup>52</sup>

While some Qatari investments in France boost global their global reputation, LNG sales and weapons procurement are the central part of Franco-Qatari relations. Al-Eshaq & Rasheed describe Qatar as an "*indispensable partner*" for France due to its LNG supplies and argue that this motivated French efforts to reach a resolution of the 2017 Gulf Crisis.<sup>53</sup> Roberts makes a similar argument concerning Qatari weapons purchases from France, pointing out that the acquisitions exceed Qatar's military capacity, and that they should therefore be viewed as efforts to secure support.<sup>54</sup> As France considers weapon exports to be an essential industry, we can again see Qatari soft power acting to secure support.

Qatar's need to solidify its security within the region has only been bolstered by recent events. Whilst the U.S. represents their biggest security partner, with Qatar hosting the largest U.S. base in the Gulf, the relationship's fragility was highlighted during Trump's presidency.<sup>55</sup> Equally, Turkey doesn't appear to represent a sufficient sole defence partner either, owing to its military being spread thinly across multiple different conflicts.<sup>56</sup> It is therefore immediately apparent why Qatar has entered this process of 'hedging' first identified by Kamrava.<sup>57</sup> Through its economic, cultural, political, and security relationship, Qatari soft power has achieved tacit French support to navigate crises.

## Overview of German-Qatari Relations

Relations between Qatar and Germany are less established when compared to France or Britain, however, they still date back to Qatari independence in 1971 as Germany was reunified just a couple of years previously.<sup>58</sup> Germany was one of the 18 initial countries chosen to host the first Qatari ambassadors when they gained independence from the British.<sup>59</sup>

Contemporary relations between the two countries are well established, spanning dialogue on issues of "*commercial, cultural, scientific, political and sports*" according to Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>60</sup> One specific area of coordination regards the Civil War and humanitarian crisis in Syria, where the two countries have cooperated in managing the situation. This has included political support from Germany to Qatar in supplying aid to Syrian rebels, although the German constitution precludes their own involvement.<sup>61</sup> More recently the two countries have been united in their opposition towards the wave of normalisation towards Al Assad's regime

by other Gulf nations.<sup>62</sup> Talks were held over this issue in May 2023, demonstrating the ongoing strategic significance of this relationship to both parties.<sup>63</sup> The relationship has also seen multiple high-level meetings between the two countries, most recently with a visit by the Emir of Qatar to Berlin in 2023 to discuss energy deals.<sup>64</sup>

## Qatari Soft-Power Initiatives with Germany

The targeted nature of Qatari investments into their partners continues to hold with Germany. The QIA's main areas of investment are the automotive, energy, and construction industries, and it is unsurprising that these are the largest sectors of the German economy.<sup>65</sup> As the following sections will demonstrate, Qatar's approach has seen systematic investment into some of the world's largest German MNCs, although this hasn't been without its problems.

As always, trade between the two countries represents an important part of the relationship, with German exports to Qatar worth approximately €1.3bn in 2022, consisting primarily of "*machinery and plant, motor vehicles, chemical products and electronics*".<sup>66</sup> Qatari exports to Germany in 2021 were worth a reported €1.46bn. Unsurprisingly this was almost entirely comprised of Oil and Gas exports.<sup>67</sup> This demonstrates the economic importance of this relationship for both parties.

In what has become a trend amongst European nations, Qatar and Germany signed a 15-year deal to purchase 2m tonnes of LNG annually. This came in the wake of uncertainty generated by the Russian war in Ukraine and represents Germany's attempts to diversify and secure its energy providers.<sup>68</sup> Again, the

vast nature of Qatari investments can be seen to facilitate their actions with the company fulfilling the deal, U.S. MNC 'ConocoPhillips', having significant ties to Qatar.<sup>69</sup>

To "promote economic cooperation" between the two countries, a German-Qatari Joint Economic Commission was created in 2017.<sup>70</sup> As part of this relationship Qatari investment into Germany totalled over €25bn by 2018, with a further €10bn being pledged by 2023 by Sheik Tamim.<sup>71</sup> One of the most notable investments is their 10.5% stake in Volkswagen which was purchased in 2009.<sup>72</sup> Volkswagen AG is the world's largest car manufacturer and comfortably Germany's biggest employer with over 295,000 domestic jobs in 2022.<sup>73</sup> Given both the economic and symbolic importance of Volkswagen to Germany, it can be seen that Qatar has continued its practice of targeting key domestic industries through acquisitions of prestigious domestic and global brands.

This approach has not been limited to Volkswagen either. In 2012 Qatar purchased a 3% stake in Siemens worth a reported €2.4bn.<sup>74</sup> Another huge German manufacturing company, Siemens is the largest in Europe and another significant domestic employer. Qatar has also been a significant stakeholder in Deutsche Bank for some time. The biggest bank in Germany with assets worth an estimated €1.32tr, Deutsche Bank represents the face of the German financial industry.<sup>75</sup> With an estimated 6.1% holding, the Qatari Royal Family is the bank's largest shareholder, something which has raised concerns with regulators.<sup>76</sup> A more recent example is RWE, one of the world's largest energy providers, based in Germany. In 2022 the QIA became the largest stakeholder in the company when it purchased €2.4bn worth of shares.<sup>77</sup> Whilst all are minority investments, they convey a





pattern of Qatari investment in Germany to target significant holdings in some of the country's leading businesses.

Qatar and Germany's political dynamic is the most interesting element of their relationship. Sigmar Gabriel, Germany's former Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs has been a vocal supporter of Qatar and can be seen as the person most responsible for cultivating relations between the two countries.<sup>78</sup> He was particularly important for Qatar during the 2017 Gulf Crisis, encouraging diplomacy and aiming to prevent further escalation of the situation.<sup>79</sup> Since leaving office he has been Qatar's 'delegate' on the Deutsche Bank board.<sup>80</sup> This close relationship with a senior politician demonstrates the considerable political investment that Qatar has made in cultivating influence within German politics. Their close relationship with Gabriel represents an example of how Qatari foreign policy has attempted to establish soft-power influence in Germany's political sphere.

Another avenue for building Qatari soft-power influence has been through the Munich Security Conference [MSC], a diplomatic conference for shaping international security policy which is partly funded by the German government.<sup>81</sup> Qatar has funded and organized MSC events in Doha, whilst Sheik Tamim was invited to address attendees in 2018. Karnitschnig and Rinaldi stress that this is not a common occurrence.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, Hamad bin Jassim [HBJ], a former PM of Qatar and widely regarded as one of the most powerful men in the country, is a member of The Board of Trustees. It is stated on their annual report that this is a position reserved for "*eminent donors*."<sup>83</sup> The significant financial investment into the MSC affords Qatar a vital seat in discussing international security policy

whilst also cultivating additional political support in Germany.

However, Qatar and Germany's political relationship has not been without turbulence. The 2022 World Cup in Qatar drew intense criticism from the German public over human rights concerns, with Interior Minister Nancy Faeser sharing this sentiment in an interview before the tournament.<sup>84</sup> The comments drew equally harsh words from Qatari officials, pointing to the "*double standard*" of Germany continuing to engage in energy deals and even describing the criticism as "*very racist*".<sup>85</sup> The biggest political upset came not from German politicians but rather from the National football team. They covered their mouths in a team photo before the first game in a protest aimed at FIFA but also squarely criticising Qatar's treatment of LGBTQ+ people.<sup>86</sup> Nancy Faeser's wearing of a banned pro-LGBTQ+ armband only further politicised the issue. Whilst not the most significant diplomatic dispute, it is symptomatic of a broader public and political aversion within Germany in dealing with Qatar.

Germany faces a dilemma between public opposition towards their relationship with Qatar, and their need for energy security achieved through Qatari imports.<sup>87</sup> The German ambassador to Qatar, Claudius Fischbach, demonstrated this in a leaked cable. He argued that Qatar was an indispensable ally in the Gulf and that their relationship with Germany should be unquestioned.<sup>88</sup> It can be understood that whilst Qatar has invested significant financial and political resources in building relations with Germany, the high degree of social consciousness in the country has blunted these attempts.

Qatari investments in Germany have been notably avoidant of many symbolic acquisitions. One of the most notable examples was their partnership with

German footballing giant Bayern Munich through Qatar Airways.<sup>89</sup> It was recently announced that this partnership wouldn't continue beyond 2023, and reports suggest that the intense fan opposition which plagued the agreement was behind the decision.<sup>90</sup> Again, outspoken public hesitancy towards the Qatari regime has hampered its ability to exert soft-power influence across Germany. This explains why symbolic investments have been so exceedingly rare.

### German Qatari Relations

Overall, Qatar's presence in Germany is the most fraught of the three countries. That their actions have been more heavily scrutinized than elsewhere goes a long way in explaining why they have avoided the "*eye-catching trophy purchases*" that have characterized their investments in other European countries such as France or Britain.<sup>91</sup> One explanation for this is that Germany [10<sup>th</sup>] considerably outranks both the UK [21<sup>st</sup>] and France [24<sup>th</sup>] in social progressive indexes.<sup>92</sup> As such, public and political voices are more likely to be steadfast in their opposition to investment from places like Qatar owing to questions over human rights abuses, particularly ones which seek to launder this reputation by being so public.<sup>93</sup> It is in this arena specifically that Qatari soft power appears to be left wanting, unable to attract the wider German public.

Despite this, it would be hard to argue that Qatar has not also enjoyed a level of success. The immense value of their FDI into the country paired with the energy security that their LNG exports provide has been enough to satisfy many of the mainstream political forces in Germany. Moreover, their position as a key investor within Germany's most important economic sectors further legitimises their position as an influential voice in the political sphere. Combined with the

support enjoyed through close relationships with politicians such as Gabriel, Qatar has effectively used its investments to lobby for a voice in Berlin.

Fischbach's cable is evidence enough that this has succeeded, and that Germany recognises Qatar's strategic importance in the current international landscape. Furthermore, their support of Qatar during the 2017 Gulf Crisis demonstrates a steadfast commitment to the partnership.<sup>94</sup> This represents an almost textbook example of soft power, as through attraction Qatar has positioned itself as a key strategic partner to Germany and in doing so now enjoys an increased degree of security.

### Overview of UK-Qatari Relations

Britain has the closest ties to Qatar and the Al-Thani ruling family of any European country. An 1868 British maritime treaty recognized Muhammad bin Thani as the first official Sheikh of Qatar.<sup>95</sup> Qatar subsequently became a British protectorate in 1916, replacing Ottoman control during WWI. Fromherz argues that the Al-Thani family's cooperation with British colonial powers played a fundamental role in them dominating Qatari governance by the time the country gained independence in 1971.<sup>96</sup> Since then, Qatar and Britain have maintained a close, economically, and politically meaningful relationship.

According to Bahgat, Britain's "long-standing political and economic relations" have been crucial in attracting FDI from Gulf SWFs, and their historic relationship with Qatar has aided this significantly.<sup>97</sup> On the 50th Anniversary of bilateral relations, Qatar and the UK created an 'annual strategic dialogue' to enhance cooperation over "regional security, trade & investment, humanitarian & developing



cooperation, energy, science & innovation, health, and education".<sup>98</sup> While the relationship is primarily economic, it is apparent that the countries view each other as strategically important in several areas beyond that. One symptom of this relationship is the induction of Qatar into Britain's new travel policy, easing movement between the two countries. Britain continues to recognise the considerable importance of its relationship with the small Gulf state.

## Qatari Soft-Power Initiatives with the UK

Much like in France and Germany, most Qatari investment in the UK was kickstarted by then-Prime Minister HBJ's £2bn injection in 2009. This investment coincided with a visit from then-Emir Sheikh Hamad, who was greeted by Queen Elizabeth II.<sup>99</sup> The Qatari rulers have a deep personal connection with the UK as both Sheikh Hamad and his son Sheikh Tamim received a military education at the prestigious Sandhurst Royal Military Academy.<sup>100</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that the UK is the largest recipient of Qatari FDI, estimated at over £40bn.<sup>101</sup>

Qatar's relationship with the UK is dictated primarily by its position as a crucial energy provider. In 2022, the UK received 40% of its LNG from the Gulf State, with a 'memorandum of understanding' being signed the same year to solidify this relationship.<sup>102</sup> In what has become a trend amongst European nations, this agreement was undoubtedly linked to the uncertainty caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>103</sup> This was made clear by then-UK Energy & Business Secretary, Kwasi Kwarteng, and demonstrates how Qatar has been able to capitalize considerably on international instability.

Qatar is the UK's second largest LNG supplier, after the United States, and an important trade partner.<sup>104</sup> In 2023, the UK exported approximately £5.3bn worth of goods to Qatar, including aircraft, industrial machinery, and jewellery, with Qatar's wealthy but developing economy a vital destination for UK goods.<sup>105</sup> Meanwhile, the UK imported an estimated £6.1bn worth of goods in the same year with gas making up 87.1% of this total.<sup>106</sup> This means that the UK operates a trade deficit with Qatar, making it the only of our three countries to do so, demonstrating the bilateral nature of this relationship.

In 2022, the UK and Qatar established a joint Strategic Investment Partnership, joined by an additional £10 billion investment into the UK by 2027.<sup>107</sup> Current Qatari investment in the UK is estimated at £40bn, a quarter of which exists as property holdings which makes the Qatar the 10th largest landowner in the UK.<sup>108</sup> This also excludes the over £1.5bn worth of real estate owned privately by Qatari royals across London, contributing to Mayfair being nicknamed 'Little Doha'.<sup>109</sup> None of these investments are more iconic than the Shard skyscraper, rescued by Qatar during the 2009 global financial crisis [GFC] with a \$2bn investment, and standing as the tallest building in Western Europe.<sup>110</sup> This wide portfolio of private and state investment illustrates just how pervasive Qatari investment is across the UK, particularly in London.

Recognising London's position as a global financial capital, Qatar has directed considerable investment into the industry. In 2014 the QIA purchased the iconic HSBC headquarters in Canary Warf for £1.1bn, then the most expensive individual building in the UK.<sup>111</sup> A year later they acquired the Canary Warf Group and its London Docklands Complex for a further £2.6bn.<sup>112</sup> Qatar's influence in the UK

finance sector has been longstanding, as in 2008 at the height of the GFC they acquired a 5.3% stake in Barclays Bank worth £4bn. This investment was notable because it saved Barclays from a state bailout or collapse.<sup>113</sup> These investments are consistent with Qatar's strategy of investment in high-profile businesses in key foreign industries.

Qatari investments in the UK extend beyond real estate, with minority and majority holdings in a variety of recognisable businesses. Mirroring their approach in France, Qatar has a portfolio of luxury hotels across London including The Ritz, Claridge's, and The Savoy. These holdings are worth approximately £5bn and remain in keeping with Qatar's focus on high-end investments.<sup>114</sup> Consistent with this approach, Qatar also bought the renowned London department store 'Harrods' in 2010 for a reported £1.5bn.<sup>115</sup> What remains evident is the targeted nature of Qatar's investments, acquiring internationally recognised brands to bolster their fledgling industry.

Beyond Central London, Qatar holds minority investments in several famous British companies. Complementing their investment in tourism and aviation globally, Qatar is the second-largest shareholder in Heathrow Airport with a 20% stake purchased in 2012 for £900m.<sup>116</sup> Additionally, Qatar has a 25% stake in the parent company of British Airways.<sup>117</sup> Regarding another important Qatari industry, the Gulf State has also made considerable infrastructural investments into Welsh gas terminals at South Hook, seeking to expand its ability to export LNG across Europe.<sup>118</sup> The investment, undertaken alongside the UK government, was described by then-British Ambassador to Qatar as a priority.<sup>119</sup> These investments further stress the calculated nature of Qatari foreign policy,

combining foreign expertise with their key economic sectors.

Given Qatar and the UK's longstanding relationship, it is unsurprising that it is accompanied by a degree of close political cooperation as well. Qatar's position as a senior political partner was demonstrated by the presence of the Emir at Queen Elizabeth II's funeral, one of the few Gulf leaders in attendance.<sup>120</sup> The close connection between the British royal family and the Qatari royal family is further illustrated by the £2m donation then-Prince Charles received for his charities from the Emir in 2015.<sup>121</sup> Whilst having a strong relationship with the British royal family doesn't immediately equate to political power, it serves to strengthen legitimacy and widen access on the international stage, therefore acting as a form of soft power in itself.

Qatar has also invested significant capital in lobbying UK MPs, paying for trips worth thousands of pounds. The trips were under the supervision of Qatar's National Human Rights Committee [NHRC], an organisation charged with the bribery of several MEPs in 2022.<sup>122</sup> Whilst it is not suggested that Qatar has bribed British MPs or broke any rules, it demonstrates Qatar's efforts to curry favour in UK politics. It has also been successful, with MP Alistar Carmichael giving a positive review of Qatar's efforts to amend human rights concerns.<sup>123</sup> This exhibits Qatar's approach to widening its support and influence through soft power.

Finally, whilst in a less resounding manner than support from France or Germany, then-UK Foreign Minister Boris Johnson was amongst those calling for an easing to the blockade and general de-escalation during the 2017 Gulf Crisis.<sup>124</sup> That support wasn't more vocal is indicative of Britain's position in the Gulf, tied closely to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain





and driven chiefly not to ‘upset the apple cart’. Therefore, whilst the political support from the UK might not be quite as committed as Qatar desires, it remains an important asset in their quest for regional security.

Qatar and the UK also enjoy a close military relationship. In 2017 Qatar purchased twenty-four ‘Eurofighter Typhoon Jets’ for £6bn from UK weapons manufacturer BAE Systems. The deal was presented as the beginning of a long-term partnership between BAE and Qatar.<sup>125</sup> Like deals done with France, the signing of it during the 2017 Gulf crisis cannot be ignored. It mattered little that the jets would not arrive for some time, rather serving to entrench the cooperation between Qatar and the UK during a crisis.

In 2021, the RAF’s No.12 Squadron became the first joint squadron since WWII when it was deployed to Qatar as part of a support and training program.<sup>126</sup> This deployment has been extended until 2025, cementing military cooperation between the two countries.<sup>127</sup> Whilst not significant in a literal sense, this represents a symbolic demonstration of Britain’s commitment to Qatari security, underscoring their close military partnership. Furthermore, in 2022 Qatar became the primary destination of UK arms exports, valued at £2.7bn, with most of these constituting additional Jets and other BAE products.<sup>128</sup> This highlights the significance of the relationship for both sides and emphasizes the commitment of the UK to supporting Qatari security.

## UK-Qatari Relations

The most crucial aspect of UK-Qatari relations is the deep historical ties between the two countries, specifically the importance of the UK to the Al-Thani Family’s ascendance to power. The UK undoubtedly has benefitted from this. Despite the United States having an

economy that is over eight times larger than the UK’s, it has only received 20% more FDI from Qatar.<sup>129</sup> Additionally, Germany, the largest economy in Europe, it has received only 60% of Qatari investment compared to the UK. As such, it becomes apparent that Qatari investments in the UK are as much about reinforcing political ties as they are concerned with financial returns.<sup>130</sup>

However, the UK’s colonial history and close relationships with many ruling families across the Gulf have also limited the potential of Qatari efforts to achieve a privileged position. The UK’s reluctance to offer steadfast support during the 2017 Gulf Crisis is illustrative of their desire to balance multiple interests. Despite this, Qatar’s increasingly indispensable position to the UK, particularly through its LNG exports, is evidence that the strategy is working. Because the UK is now invested in Qatar’s stability, Qatar can feel it has achieved the base condition of security required for exercising ‘subtle power.’<sup>131</sup>

Qatari investment in the UK clearly aligns economic investments with efforts to cultivate the prestige required for the building of their subtle power.<sup>132</sup> Qatar’s practice of procuring luxury hotels, shops, and real estate across London, is designed to elevate the country’s prestige globally. Their acquisition of the Shard epitomizes this approach. By owning one of the most famous buildings in one of the most famous cities in the world, Qatar signifies to the entire world that it is wealthy, powerful, and influential.

Similarly to their approaches in France and Germany, Qatar has targeted investment into sectors where the UK excels. This is undertaken as a means of legitimizing their presence and interests. Their stake in Barclays and Canary Warf recognises the UK, and specifically London, as a global financial hub. By using the considerable



resources of the QIF, Qatar has been able to insert itself into these institutions, creating two distinct effects. Firstly, it confirms Qatar as an important international actor and opens the doors for new opportunities. Secondly and most importantly, it ties the health of crucial international organizations to the security of the country. This ensures that Qatar is viewed as indispensable by global actors who will therefore be committed to ensuring its stability. Qatar hopes to be considered too important to be allowed to fail.

## Comparison

A common theme of Qatar's behaviour across all three countries is securing long-term LNG contracts, with each country becoming increasingly reliant on these imports for their energy security following the instability in Russia and Ukraine since 2022.<sup>133</sup> Economically, these contracts are highly beneficial for Qatar, generating billions of dollars of wealth annually, facilitating the continued build-up of prestige and influence crucial for subtle power. More importantly, these deals entrench Qatar as an indispensable partner. The stability and security of Qatar has become rapidly more important to all three countries, making them more likely to provide economic and military support in a time of crisis. Therefore, by establishing itself as a vital supplier of LNG, Qatar has bought support from its European allies. This also represents Qatar's policy of hedging, guaranteeing their security arrangements even if relations with the U.S. were to sour like they did during the 2017 Gulf Crisis.<sup>134</sup>

A consistent pattern of Qatar's interactions with each country is the importance of military hardware deals in building these relationships, serving two distinct purposes. Qatar's wealth has allowed it to grow its defence expenditure, rising by

over 700% from 2010 to a total of \$15.41bn in 2022.<sup>135</sup> As such, they are better positioned to defend themselves against potential security threats. Furthermore, these deals come with more intangible security assistance. That these deals far exceed the Qatari Military's capabilities is unimportant. This is because they are accompanied by access to military assistance and expertise of much more powerful European nations.

Additionally, for France and the UK, Qatar represents a key market for military exports, deepening their economic incentive to ensure the continued protection of Qatar. Interestingly, Germany has been more cautious towards military support for Qatar, though this is explained by the heightened public opposition towards military involvement. Whilst Germany has engaged in some military deals with Qatar, they have been subject to considerable public outcry compared to in France or the UK.<sup>136</sup>

Qatar's pursuit of prestige across France and the UK, compared to Germany, is perhaps where there is the biggest contrast in their approaches. In France and the UK, Qatar has directed considerable investment into purchasing luxury hotels, department stores, and expensive real estate. This has been accompanied by eye-catching purchases such as Paris St. Germain or the Shard. These acquisitions are an element of the international marketing efforts identified by Kamrava.<sup>137</sup> They serve to establish a global view of Qatar as wealthy, influential, and powerful. Their marketing efforts both domestically and abroad have also resulted in projections for huge growth in tourism across the country.<sup>138</sup> This serves the goal of economic diversification which is central to Qatar's future security.

Comparatively, Qatar's investment strategy in Germany has been remarkably



unexceptional. Whilst they have invested in key German industries and historic companies such as Volkswagen, they have behaved in an understated manner so as not to draw unwanted attention. This is shaped in part by past controversies, such as their highly contentious sponsorship of Bayern Munich through Qatar Airways or their purchase of German tanks.<sup>139</sup> This demonstrates the pragmatism of Qatar's approach, recognising that attempts to build prestige in Germany would likely be met with unwanted opposition and instead adopting a more muted approach focused on expanding influence elsewhere.

Another key element of Qatar's foreign policy has been to position itself as a leading figure in conflict mediation and resolution, cultivating goodwill from the international community. This has been a key pillar in furthering their reputation as a "*global good citizen*" across the European countries.<sup>140</sup> Qatar has supported France with mediation efforts in Lebanon on multiple occasions, has worked closely with Germany regarding the Syrian civil war, and has recently been involved in providing humanitarian aid to Gaza alongside the UK.<sup>141</sup> By doing this, Qatar has fortified its reputation as a positive and important international force. Furthermore, by working alongside the three European countries Qatar demonstrates itself to be a strategic ally in the region, furthering international support for its security. This approach has already shown benefits, with the 'credit' built up by Qatar so far being enough to stem calls for sanctions over its assistance of Hamas.<sup>142</sup>

Qatar's substantial economic investments in Germany, France, and the UK – over €25bn, €27bn, and €40bn respectively – affords it significant influence domestically and internationally.<sup>143</sup> One clear benefit of this is the security dimension, whereby the economic importance of Qatar helps fortify

commitments towards their independence amidst tensions in the Gulf. The other advantage is the influence it affords Qatar in economic decisions. As a key stakeholder in each country, the domestic governments are incentivised to establish conditions which foster a positive relationship and continued investment. For example, in both France and the UK, Qatar enjoys agreements which allow citizens to avoid paying taxes on profits from real estate sales.<sup>144</sup> Again, public hesitancy in Germany is responsible for less hospitable investment conditions.

A key theme of Qatari investment in the three countries is their strategy of acquiring or investing in major brands with each country's largest economic sectors. In France, investments in luxury brands like Balmain and the department store Printemps leverage the countries position in luxury goods, whilst their outlay on hotels and hospitality reflect its position as the world's primary tourist destination.<sup>145</sup> In Germany, Qatar's stakes in Volkswagen and Siemens reflect the country's manufacturing reputation, their investment in Deutch Bank is representative of Frankfurt's position as a financial hub.<sup>146</sup> This trend continues with the UK. Their ventures in Canary Wharf and Barclays clearly illustrates London's position as Europe's financial capital.<sup>147</sup> Again, the importance of this is twofold. Firstly, it widens their access to global actors as they become significant stakeholders in the global industry. Secondly, it expands Qatar's importance within the global economy. As such, it ensures that there is global consensus for ensuring their security and stability.

Another common strategy of Qatar's foreign policy in each country has been its focus on cultivating political support, typically by fostering close relationships with politicians. In both France and Germany, Qatar has built strong ties with

high-level ministers Nicholas Sarkozy and Sigmar Gabriel, respectively. In both cases, visible public support whilst serving in Government has been followed by board positions in Qatari-owned companies. The situation in the UK is slightly different, particularly because the Qatari royal family already enjoys close relations with the British royal family as well. Despite this, they have still invested considerable funds into lobbying efforts of MPs. This demonstrates the strategy within Qatari foreign policy of employing its considerable wealth to purchase political influence through lobbying. Furthermore, by building favour abroad Qatar, can increase the likelihood that they would be supported in a crisis.

Finally, another theme of Qatar's investments in the West has been their timing, specifically that they have often appeared when finance has been hugely necessary. Their investments into both Barclays and the Shard came in the context of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, with it claimed that the bank was rescued from a government bailout, whilst Gulf State stepped in to finance the Shard's construction following financial issues.<sup>148</sup> Equally, through beIN Sports and their ownership of PSG, Qatar has had a significant hand in ensuring that French domestic football has been able to keep pace with the rest of Europe.<sup>149</sup> Even in Germany, Qatar has leveraged its funding of the MSC into increased access and influence at the international security conference. This demonstrates the tactical way Qatar has used its finances to exploit unstable circumstances and create favourable conditions to grow its influence in the international system.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study set out to examine Qatar's foreign policy behaviour across Western Europe with a specific focus on France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. It has found Qatari foreign policy to be a considered and deliberate strategy designed to expand the country's soft power influence both within the Gulf and on the international stage, going well beyond the expected behaviour of "*hedging*" that is traditionally employed by small states.<sup>150</sup> Despite the material differences between Qatar's approach in each of the three countries, for example the departure from prestigious acquisitions in Germany or limited political support in the UK, they clearly follow the same fundamental approach. Using Kamrava's framework of subtle power, this research has charted and explained the specific actions of Qatar in each country as part of a four-pronged approach motivated towards ensuring its national security through becoming an essential economic partner, cultivating prestige across the globe via eye-catching acquisitions and projects, positioning itself as a leader in conflict mediation to cultivate a reputation of being a global good citizen, and ultimately growing its influence well beyond its historic standing with the aid of vast natural wealth.<sup>151</sup> This study, alongside the broad example of Qatar's behaviour, raises questions regarding the traditional understanding of how small states act in the international system. These findings demonstrate a wide scope for future research to examine the requisite conditions which allow some small states to exploit their circumstances and have outsized global influences, whilst others remain limited in their ability to do so.



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