

THE STRATEGY OF SMALL STATE IN MEDIATION: QATAR'S ENGAGEMENT IN THE AFGHANISTAN PEACE PROCESS

ABHISHEK PAL¹

¹Ph.D, Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, U.P. INDIA

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how small state, Qatar, utilizes mediation as a key tool of foreign policy strategy to maximize its geopolitical influence in the West Asian Region. Despite small geographical size and military capability, Qatar strategically employs culture, economics and media to shape the perception of the country. The study analyses the Qatari role in facilitating mediation in the signing of the United States (U.S.)-Taliban agreement. The paper highlights the limitation of realist approach in mediating the conflict in Afghanistan, which emphasizes formal alliances and national security to resolve the conflict through military means in international politics. In contrast to this, in mediation strategy, an impartial third party provides help to disputing parties to search the common ground for negotiations and peace settlements. The study concludes that how Qatar can mediate the regional conflict through the various mediation strategies such as financial assistance, humanitarian aids and cultural diplomacy to bring peace and prosperity across the region.

KEY WORDS: Mediation, small-state diplomacy, Afghan peace process, geopolitical influence

INTRODUCTION

Mediation, defined by the United Nations as a conflict resolution process whereby a third party assists two or more parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict by helping them to develop mutually acceptable agreements, has long been a key component of international relations (United Nations, 2012). International relations theory and its major approaches have acknowledged the role of small states in mediation. State-led mediation has been associated with major powers that possess significant military and economic strength to enforce the agreements (Touval & Zartman, 1985, 7-9). Historically, international mediation has been seen as the domination of great powers, states like the United States and Russia, because they possess strong military, political and economic influence. These great powers can pressure conflicting parties and provide security guarantees and financial support for peace agreements, making their mediation efforts more effective and sustainable.

But international mediation is a structured process, involves multiple actors, and including The Governments, the third parties (state, non-state actors or independent organizations), and needs strong institutional mechanism which may assist conflicting actors to manage or resolve disputes through negotiation and diplomacy. Powerful states in the international system often play the role of effective mediators because they possess political influence, economic resources and military strength that can coerce the conflicting parties to

cooperate and maintain peace agreements (Bercovitch, 1992, 15-18). However, some international mediation efforts succeed while others failed because the outcome of mediation depends on several factors, including the intensity of conflict, time of mediation, the strategies used by mediators, and willingness of conflicting parties to find the common ground for negotiations (Kleiboer, 1996, 364-368). Qatar is a small state, although it lacks military strength like great powers, the United States and Russia. It has emerged as an effective mediator in conflicts across the West Asian Region by maintaining the diplomatic relations with diverse actors, including rival states and non-state actors. Qatar engaged in key mediation such as the Lebanon crisis and the Afghanistan peace talks. The study highlights that small states can utilize diplomacy, neutrality, financial resources and communication networks to facilitate negotiations among disputing parties. Modern conflict resolution often requires a flexible and multidimensional approach rather than depending only on military power because mediators build the strategy for dialogue, maintain communication channels, and make coordination among multiple actors involved in conflict (Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 1999, 3-5). Further, Qatar gained international credibility as a neutral mediator due to its pragmatic diplomacy and financial strength. In addition, economic resources allowed Qatar to host negotiations, provide humanitarian assistance and facilitate the communication channels between conflicting actors; including natural gas exports strengthened Qatar's soft power and enabled it to engage independently in international mediation. As Qatar's

mediation strategy during the US-Taliban negotiations demonstrated, Qatar's engagement in the US-Taliban peace deal restored Doha's credibility as an unbiased regional and global mediator and opened new opportunities for the country to promote its neutral diplomacy in international politics in the period of diplomatic crisis (Shpakovskaya & Gryzlov, 2025, 721-732).

Since the early 2000s, Qatar has pursued an independent and flexible foreign policy based on dialogue, neutrality, and peaceful conflict resolution because mediation and diplomacy are the central pillars of the country's foreign policy and also constitutionally recognized under Article 7 of the 2003 constitution. Qatar attempted to mediate a number of different conflicts between 2006 and 2020, including the Lebanon-Doha agreement (2008), conflict in Sudan (Darfur region) and the United States (US)-Taliban agreement (2020). The study seeks to answer these challenges; the article utilizes the mediation strategy that demonstrates how a small state, Qatar, may transform economic resources and financial strength into diplomatic influence. Through hosting peace talks and providing communication channels to rival actors, Qatar has built its reputation as a trusted intermediary. This approach is described as "niche diplomacy", where a small state specializes in selected areas such as mediation, humanitarian diplomacy, and conflict resolution to maximize international influence (Chaziza 2025). Furthermore, this article addresses the conceptual and theoretical limitation of the realist assumption by introducing the concept of mediation which is explicitly operationalized to explain how Qatar bridges the traditional, binary gap between the non-threatening impartiality of small states and resource-heavy, coercive larger global powers. Qatar's unique geopolitical position – characterized by the absence of a western colonial past, immense sovereign hydrocarbon wealth, a shared regional and religious position, and profound strategic ties to western security architecture – increases its image of trustworthiness (Aras & Akpinar, 2026).

MEDIATION IN QATAR'S FOREIGN POLICY

Qatar emerged as an influential mediator in the Gulf Region. Because Qatar's immense wealth and extensive political ties with its two rival neighbors Saudi Arabia and Iran, and United States which provides security, make it highly effective in bringing the conflicting parties to the negotiation table. However, its mediation efforts are frequently undermined due to lack of long-term institutional capacity and post-conflict monitoring (Barakat, 2014). Moreover; Qatar was incentivized to employ state branding and hedging strategies due to the 'structural constraints posed by its small size and geographical location' situated between powerful neighbors Saudi Arabia, with which it shares only a land border, and Iran, with which Qatar shares its largest field, the North Dome gas field

(Kamrava, 2015, 65-66). Qatar also adopts an active soft power strategy involving several tools, including establishing the Al-Jazeera media network and investing in culture and education through the Qatar Foundation.

Qatar transformed from a regional actor in the 1990s into a global mediator due to its increasing wealth from oil and hydrocarbon economy that strengthened country financial condition and helped the other countries financially in the region during major conflicts. Moreover; country has aligned with United-States which provides security to the country in The Gulf Region. Therefore this seems that the enormous wealth and security guarantee may shape the country's diplomatic credibility and perception. But its role in mediation may remain critical over the degree of biasness and neutrality. However, in the later period, Qatar mainly adopted different strategy particularly the 2017 gulf crisis and post-2020, during the crisis, Qatar's diplomatic influence declined due to tension with neighboring Gulf Countries. Crises became deeper when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt. These countries had not severed only the diplomatic ties and imposed a land, sea and air blockade on Qatar but also they had put the thirteen demands, including shutting down the Al-Jazeera Media Network, breaking ties with The Islamists Groups (Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood), and reducing the diplomatic relation with Iran. However; Qatar rejected these demands and maintained the communication with different parties, including government, opposition groups and non-state actors. To boost the economy, Qatar promoted the local manufacturing and referred it the defense of national sovereignty. this might seems that Qatar's role as a neutral mediator by providing platform for dialogue and negotiations (Milton et.al., 2025). Qatar's mediation strategy shows both continuity and change because it continues to rely on diplomacy and neutrality and peace building but it lacks the institutional mechanism to enforce the long-term sustainable peace in the region.

On the other hand, Western States and other international institutions such as United Nations and World Bank emphasize that peace should be achieved by introducing democracy, human rights, free-market economy, rule of law and strong state institutions in the war-torn country. This is known as liberal peace model; however it may fail in establishing the peace because it does not give the much importance to the local cultures and traditions ignore the social and economic needs and empower the civil society (Richmond, 2006). Therefore liberal model of peace building focuses on democratic institutions and free – market economy which often undermine the real needs of local people such as employment and education; moreover it also does not adopt the peace building from the bottom up instead focuses only the top down approach.

Because of this, peace might be fragile and may not sustain for long-term.

Qatar's first mediation was reported in the Hunnish Islands dispute between Eritrea and Yemen in December 1995, shortly after Sheikh Hamad Al-Thani's succession as the Emir (Munich, 2015). Since then Qatar's mediation efforts expanded, including the 2008 Lebanese political crisis, the 2007-2010 Houthi ceasefires in Yemen, the 2010-2011 Darfur peace process and the 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement.

QATAR'S MEDIATION IN AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS

On February 29, 2020, a peace agreement was signed by both the Americans and the Taliban after eighteen years of Afghan war. During this war in Afghanistan, both parties try their best to defeat each other by using force, but both parties badly fail to achieve peace, and they lose many civilian lives and cause destruction in the country, which highly affects not only these parties but also other regions of the world. The Afghan peace process became a major platform through which Qatar demonstrated its diplomatic capabilities. The establishment of the Taliban political office in Doha, Qatar, in 2013 facilitated negotiations that culminate in the Doha Agreement of 2020 between the Taliban and the United States. However, Qatar positioned itself as a credible mediator between the Taliban, the United States, and regional actors during the Afghan conflict. This reflects that Qatar's mediation strategy adopts a broader foreign policy approach based on neutrality, humanitarian diplomacy, financial assistance and international profile (Kamrava 2013, 45).

One of the primary foundations of Qatar's mediation strategy in Afghanistan was the use of financial resources to facilitate the negotiations and enhance the diplomatic influence among disputed parties. Qatar transformed its economic wealth into political capital by investing in mediation and international diplomacy (Kamrava, 2011, 541). Although hosting negotiations in Doha and supporting diplomatic infrastructure, Qatar projected itself as a reliable mediator capable of sustaining long-term peace processes. Similarly, other research argues that Qatar's wealth provided flexibility and autonomy, allowing it to maintain relations with both western powers and Islamist groups simultaneously (Uirichsen, 2014, 77). However, in contrast to this study, Qatar's mediation strategy was not based on purely altruistic principles but was part of a broader strategy to increase geopolitical influence and secure regime survival (Roberts, 2017).

Another important mediation strategy was employed by Doha in the U.S.-Afghanistan peace agreement: the use of soft power. Soft power is the ability of a nation to influence other nations and actors through non-coercive methods, emphasizing attraction and persuasion rather than force (Nye,

1990). In modern times, it encompasses cultural, economic, and ideological aspects to gain global influence by projecting a positive image of the country by appealing to its shared values and strategies (Nye, 2004). Qatar's expertise in mediation diplomacy is reflected in its ability to build alliances, influence perceptions, and utilize cultural and diplomatic initiatives in international engagement.

Qatar's emergence as an influential actor in the global arena is evident. In the realm of humanitarian diplomacy, its combination of financial capacity, media presence and political balance has made it an influential actor, as recognized by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNHCR) (Barakat & Milton, 2024). Moreover, Qatar's humanitarian assistance enhanced its international reputation as a responsible actor willing to engage with multiple actors in conflict.

Qatar's mediation in U.S.-Taliban peace: Realist perspective

The 2020 U.S.-Taliban Doha Agreement marked a critical realignment in global geopolitics, formalizing the exits of American forces from Afghanistan after nearly two decades of military involvement. Traditional structural realism posits that the international system is anarchic, forcing states to maximize their security through self-help, material balance, and strategic alliances. Within this framework, small states are typically viewed as peripheral actors vulnerable to the structural pressure of great powers. However, Qatar's hyperactive diplomacy during the U.S.-Taliban negotiations challenges conventional assumptions, demonstrating how a small state can leverage asymmetric diplomatic infrastructure to guarantee its own survival. By maintaining relations with multiple actors – including the Taliban, the United States, and regional Islamist movements – Qatar adopted a hedging strategy aimed at preserving flexibility and maximizing political leverage because Qatar adopted mediation as an instrument through which Qatar ensured regime survival and foreign policy autonomy amid regional stability (Kamrava, 2011).

However, contrasting perspectives challenge the realist interpretation of the Afghan peace deal; critics within the field of international relations and peace studies have argued that the liberal peace model frequently overlooks unique local contexts, exacerbates existing socio-economic fault lines, and prioritizes a superficial, state-centric pacification over genuine social justice or the integration of indigenous reconciliation traditions (Aras & Akpinar, 2026). The abrupt, chaotic end to the two-decade Western state-building project in Afghanistan has precipitated a profound crisis of confidence in the liberal peace building model, necessitating a critical re-evaluation of how international actors approach intractable intrastate conflicts (Aras & Akpinar, 2026).

Overall, the realist perspective explains Qatar's mediation in the U.S.-Taliban deal as an effort to maximize influence, security and a high diplomatic profile at the global level. In contrast, the liberal approach of peace studies highlights the significance of international cooperation and diplomatic engagement and overlooks the local contexts.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the state of Qatar's distinctive diplomatic strategy as a non-Western mediator in the Afghan conflict. Qatar's engagement in the Afghanistan peace process highlighted one of the most significant examples of small-state mediation in contemporary international relations. By hosting negotiations between the Taliban and the United States, Qatar transformed itself into a central actor in global diplomacy despite its limited territorial size and military capability.

Additionally, a study showed how the realist and liberal approaches to conflict mediation faced challenges in building the peace in the Afghan conflict. Despite the U.S.'s large army size and coercive power, the country did not achieve the peace deal. On the other hand, Qatar utilized soft power, financial strength, and humanitarian diplomacy to project the image of a neutral mediator. Further, Qatar's mediation in Afghanistan's peace illustrates the growing importance of small-state diplomacy in contemporary international relations. In conclusion, Qatar's evolving role in mediation demonstrated that mediation in international relations can not only be guaranteed by great powers but also small states can play an effective role in establishing peace through humanitarian aid, soft power diplomacy, and financial assistance. Consequently, mediation strategy as a tool of analysis in foreign policy offered rich and dynamic perspectives to resolve the conflict in international relations.

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