

# Mediation as Strategic Agency: Comparing Qatar's Hedging and Turkey's Balancing in the Gaza and Ukraine Conflicts

Pınar Akpınar

Assistant Professor, Department of International Affairs & Gulf Studies Program, Qatar University, Doha  
E-Mail: p.akpinar@qu.edu.qa  
Orcid: 0000-0003-2828-5979

Ahmet Erdi Öztürk

Reader, Department of Politics and International Relations, London Metropolitan University, London  
E-Mail: e.ozturk@londonmet.ac.uk  
Orcid: 0000-0003-1749-6682

## Abstract

This article examines mediation as a form of strategic agency by comparing Qatar's hedging in Gaza and Turkey's balancing in Ukraine. It argues that mediation is increasingly instrumentalized by small and middle powers to manage uncertainty, enhance autonomy, and project influence in a fragmented international order. Drawing on theories of hedging and balancing, the study demonstrates how mediation functions as a key instrument through which these strategies are enacted. Qatar employs mediation as a cautious, risk-averse strategy to diversify alliances, safeguard regime security, and amplify its global reputation. At the same time, Turkey integrates mediation into a more assertive balancing approach that leverages military capacity, institutional ties, and regional ambitions. Using qualitative comparative analysis of diplomatic initiatives—including Qatar's role in Gaza War talks and Turkey's mediation in the Russia-Ukraine War—the article contributes to debates on non-Western diplomacy. It shows how mediation functions simultaneously as conflict management, reputational capital, and a strategic instrument of foreign policy.

**Keywords:** small states, middle powers, non-Western diplomacy, conflict management, foreign policy autonomy

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## Introduction

The erosion of the post-Cold War liberal order, together with intensifying rivalries among major powers, has fundamentally reshaped the international system, generating new forms of uncertainty and opportunities for emerging powers. The perceived stable framework of global governance has come under strain because of great-power competition, military interventions, and systemic crises. In particular, the costly failures of interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, alongside growing internal divisions, have significantly weakened Western credibility in conflict resolution, undermining the legitimacy of Western liberal peace efforts (Richmond

2006; Newman et al. 2009; Paris 2010). This erosion has created space for non-Western states like Qatar and Turkey to reposition themselves as mediators. No longer confined to the margins of international diplomacy, both countries now participate in high-stakes negotiations, addressing regional and international conflicts while simultaneously advancing their own strategic objectives. Their mediation activism reflects a broader recalibration of global diplomacy, in which emerging powers increasingly employ mediation as a tool to project influence, manage strategic risks, and navigate systemic uncertainty (Akpınar 2015; Alqashouti 2021; Aras and Ansari 2024).

The rise of non-Western mediators necessitates a reconceptualization of mediation as strategic agency rather than altruistic brokerage. Focusing on Qatar and Turkey, this article examines how small and middle powers deploy mediation within shifting systemic and regional environments, and why their approaches diverge. Drawing on hedging and balancing frameworks, it argues that mediation reflects differences in structural power, risk tolerance, and diplomatic autonomy. Turkey integrates mediation into a broader balancing strategy to constrain rivals and assert regional leadership. At the same time, Qatar adopts a hedging strategy to preserve flexibility, avoid strategic entrapment, and maintain diplomatic maneuverability.

Although related, hedging and balancing are distinct orientations toward uncertainty and power. Hedging involves engaging multiple powers while avoiding rigid commitments, enabling small states to manage risk and preserve flexibility (Medeiros 2005; Goh 2007; Dar 2025). Qatar illustrates this logic: while hosting the United States (US) Central Command at Al-Udeid, it sustains pragmatic ties with Iran, maintains dialogue with Hamas, and engages with Israel. Its mediation efforts—from the Gaza War to Afghanistan—reflect a strategy of calculated ambiguity that helps preserve diplomatic room for maneuver and project soft power (Aras and Akpınar 2026; Guzansky 2015; Hamdi and Salman 2020; Aras and Ansari 2024). While existing studies show Qatar as a hedging state, this article goes further by showing how mediation functions as the instrument through which hedging is practiced.

Balancing, in contrast, entails a more assertive behavior that involves aligning against rivals while safeguarding autonomy, through military build-ups, alliances, and institutional diplomacy (Dadwal 2012; Pattanaik 2019). Turkey illustrates this orientation: while formally a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally, it pursues autonomy by balancing Western commitments with ties to Russia and regional powers. Its role in the Ukraine war—mediating the Black Sea Grain Initiative and facilitating prisoner exchanges—demonstrates balancing logic (Yanık 2023; Wódka 2023). Through mediation, Turkey positions itself as indispensable to NATO while sustaining relations with Moscow, reinforcing its influence and regional ambitions (Akpınar 2022).

The cases of Qatar in Gaza and Turkey in Ukraine show how mediation reflects states' structural positions and foreign policy orientations. Rather than a uniform or purely normative tool, mediation is a strategy shaped by geopolitical context, alliances, historical experience, and material capacity. For Qatar, mediation in Gaza reflects the constraints of a small state reliant on external security guarantees. Limited military power and regional volatility heighten

risk sensitivity, pushing Doha to use mediation as soft power to manage vulnerability, diversify partnerships, and enhance its standing. This aligns with hedging, where ambiguity, financial means, and network-building compensate for structural dependence. Turkey's role in the Russia–Ukraine war illustrates a contrasting logic. As a NATO-anchored middle power with military capacity and regional activism, Turkey tolerates greater risk and integrates mediation into a balancing strategy that manages alliance pressures and asserts autonomy. Hosting talks, facilitating the Black Sea Grain Initiative, and brokering prisoner exchanges signal Ankara's indispensability to both NATO and Moscow, linking mediation to efforts to shape, rather than simply navigate, the regional order. These cases confirm that mediation is a strategic instrument embedded in power politics rather than a purely humanitarian practice (Bercovitch et al. 1991; Touval 1992; Ramsbotham et al. 2012). Through hedging and balancing, Qatar uses mediation to reduce vulnerability and build reputation, while Turkey deploys it to pursue autonomy, leadership, and alliance management.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it advances a theoretically grounded framework linking mediation to hedging and balancing, thereby repositioning it as a key component of small- and middle-power strategies. Second, it provides empirical insights through a comparative study of Qatar and Turkey. Despite their divergent scales and ideology, both countries centralize mediation in foreign policy. Third, it shows that mediation functions not only as conflict management but also as a vehicle for reputation-building and alliance diversification in a fragmented world order. The article first outlines a theoretical framework that links mediation to hedging and balancing, situating Qatar and Turkey within broader debates on small and middle powers. It then examines Qatar's mediation in Gaza and Turkey's in Ukraine, before concluding with a comparative analysis. Together, these sections address how mediation functions as a strategic agency under distinct hedging and balancing orientations in an era of multipolar competition and systemic fragmentation.

## **Theoretical Framework: Strategic Mediation and State Agency**

This section establishes the conceptual groundwork for analyzing mediation as a form of strategic agency by small and middle powers in a fragmented international system. Rather than a purely normative or humanitarian practice, mediation is reconceptualized as a foreign policy instrument through which states navigate systemic uncertainty, project influence, and secure autonomy within shifting orders. The framework centers on strategic hedging and strategic balancing, which capture distinct orientations toward risk management and power asymmetries. It shows how the size, capabilities, and structural constraints of states shape mediation logics, with smaller, risk-averse actors gravitating toward hedging through ambiguity and reputational diplomacy. At the same time, more capable middle powers integrate mediation into balancing strategies to reinforce autonomy and regional ambitions.

Amid an increasingly fragmented international order, small and middle powers are adopting flexible, adaptive foreign policy tools to navigate uncertainty and asymmetry. Rothstein

(1968: 23–29) argues that small states are defined not simply by material variables such as population or territory, but by their recognition of their limited ability to secure themselves without external help. Keohane (1969: 295–296) builds on this by suggesting that smallness is a function of how elites perceive their role in the international system. This relational-functional understanding helps explain why states like Qatar, despite their vast economic resources, behave strategically as small states—opting for diplomacy over confrontation to maintain autonomy under external security umbrellas (Willis 2021: 21).

Small states like Qatar, which lack significant military or economic clout, turn to diplomatic instruments such as mediation to project influence and maintain autonomy. They engage in niche diplomacy (Cooper 1997; Barakat 2014; Alqashouti 2021; Milton-Edwards 2023; Aras et al. 2024; Pericoli and Donelli 2024), leveraging soft power tools to carve out strategic relevance. They tend to act as norm entrepreneurs or defenders of global issues, such as the Pacific small island states engaging in climate change activism (Willis 2021: 19), Sweden defending women’s rights through its feminist foreign policy (Zilla 2022), and the Netherlands (Baehr et al. 2002) and recently Montenegro (Lakatos 2017) defending human rights in the international arena. As norm entrepreneurs, they also use platforms like mediation to gain visibility and credibility in regional and global affairs (Ingebritsen 2002; Willis 2021; Zilla 2022). While European small states such as Finland and Norway are often cited for their mediation roles (Waage 2007: 159; Skånland 2010: 39), this trend has expanded to include Gulf states like Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman (Cooper and Momani 2011; Fraihat 2020; Ulrichsen 2021).

One adaptive strategy frequently employed by small states is strategic hedging, which involves a calculated mix of cooperation and risk mitigation to avoid dependence on a single major power (Medeiros 2005). It allows states to cope with ambiguity and volatility, as illustrated by China’s simultaneous engagement with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel without firm alliances (Garlick and Havlová 2020). Goh (2007: 121) conceptualizes hedging as “neither to pick sides nor to exclude certain great powers, but rather to try to include all the various major powers in the region’s strategic affairs.” As Bakir and Al-Shamari (2025) and Monshipouri et al. (2025: 75) note, intensifying US–China competition has prompted Gulf Cooperation Council states—particularly Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—to adopt hedging strategies, balancing economic ties with China against security partnerships with the US. Qatar reflects this logic by maintaining ties with the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Hamas, and the Taliban while pursuing mediation initiatives to enhance soft power without antagonizing stronger actors (Guzansky 2015; Hamdi and Salman 2020).

Hedging thus involves both engagement and indirect deterrence. For example, Taiwan’s foreign policy toward China and Japan (Leng and Liao 2016), Indonesia’s diplomacy (Gindarsah 2016), and Nepal’s regional positioning vis-à-vis India, China, and the US power (Dar 2025) reflect diverse hedging strategies. Building on the growing literature, Dar (2025: 318-319) classifies hedging strategies into four analytical categories: (1) as an alignment behaviour that extends traditional balance-of-power theory (Tessman and Wolfe 2011; Lim and Cooper 2015; Ciorciari 2019; Korolev 2019; Kuik 2021); (2) as a hybrid tactic that combines elements

of bandwagoning and balancing (Medeiros 2005; Dar 2021); (3) as a pattern of equidistant behaviour, particularly by smaller states (Jackson 2014); and (4) as a strategic response to specific risks such as energy disruption (Tessman and Wolfe 2011; Tunsjo 2013; Salman et al. 2015). Each framework offers unique insights into how states manage strategic uncertainty.

In small states, hedging strategies often coexist in layered, adaptive forms. Existing studies conceptualize Qatar's foreign policy primarily through strategic hedging, particularly in its relations with Iran and during the 2017 blockade crisis (Orhan 2023). Scholars also examine Qatar's role in conflict mediation, emphasizing soft power, neutrality, and reputational strategies (Milton et al. 2023). This article aims to bridge the gap between these strands by conceptualizing mediation not merely as a foreign policy tool, but as a key instrument through which hedging is operationalized in practice.

Hedging, moreover, is not exclusive to small states; it has been applied to cases such as Japan (Erkan and Sato 2025) and Turkey (Alim 2022; Kara 2024). Accordingly, this article treats hedging and balancing as dominant orientations rather than fixed categories and argues that Turkey's behavior in the Russia–Ukraine war reflects a predominantly balancing logic. Strategic balancing represents an assertive mode of state agency, one that exceeds the risk avoidance and ambiguity associated with hedging. It involves cultivating ties across rival blocs while actively shaping regional dynamics in line with national interests. In the literature, balancing explains how middle powers leverage their geopolitical weight, institutional embeddedness, and diplomatic activism to pursue strategic autonomy. Turkey fits this pattern, maintaining relations with competing blocs while asserting their own agenda.

Turkey's balancing strategy manifests as a multi-vector foreign policy that sustains relations with NATO, Russia, Iran, and the European Union (EU) simultaneously, often exploiting the frictions among these actors to expand its own room for maneuver. This posture is especially salient in conflict theatres such as Syria, where Ankara has combined military assertiveness with diplomatic brokerage (Taşpınar 2012: 128), and Ukraine, where Turkish mediation in the Black Sea Grain Initiative reflects a simultaneous commitment to NATO and transactional engagement with Russia (Elver and Akpınar 2022; İldem 2022; Mankoff 2022). Similar dynamics are visible in the sphere of energy diplomacy, where Turkey has sought to mediate between US sanctions regimes and Iranian energy flows (OxResearch Daily Brief Service 2011).

Scholars have also noted that Turkey has a dual identity, being anchored in Western institutional frameworks while simultaneously cultivating regional autonomy and alternative partnerships (Göksel 2014). In contrast to hedging, which privileges flexibility and ambiguity, balancing conveys an active orientation toward shaping and contesting prevailing orders. For Turkey, with its dual Western and non-Western identity, balancing is a recurring theme. Analyses highlight how it mediates between the EU (Göksel 2014), Central Asia (Fida 2018), Russia and Ukraine (Akpınar 2022; İldem 2022; Mankoff 2022), Syria (Taşpınar 2012), the US and Iran in gas deals (OxResearch Daily Brief Service 2011), and broader MENA relations

(Ghanem and Akpınar 2024). Such strategies show how middle powers exploit institutional capacity, regional ambitions, and geopolitical leverage to shape order.

These two logics—hedging and balancing—offer a typology for analyzing mediation as strategic agency. Mediation, far from altruistic, is increasingly seen as calculated statecraft to accumulate diplomatic capital, enhance leverage, and mitigate vulnerabilities. Its form depends on state size, material power, strategic intent, and institutional context. Within this framework, Turkey’s mediation exemplifies balancing for autonomy, while Qatar’s illustrates hedging for flexibility and survival. Both cases demonstrate mediation as a strategic practice in a contested international order. This study treats hedging and balancing as strategic orientations toward uncertainty rather than as direct functions of state size or material capacity. Soft power instruments, risk tolerance, and alliance pressures are analyzed as the modalities through which these strategies are operationalized in mediation, not as independent explanatory factors.

## Methodology

This study adopts a comparative qualitative case study design to examine how small and middle powers employ mediation as a form of strategic agency within a transforming international order. A comparative approach is particularly well suited to the analysis of foreign policy strategies, as it allows for the identification of both shared patterns and meaningful divergences while remaining attentive to historical, regional, and institutional context (Bennett and Elman 2007). By comparing Qatar and Turkey, the study shows how differences in structural position, material capacity, and strategic priorities shape how states use mediation to expand diplomatic influence, manage uncertainty, and pursue regime and foreign policy objectives.

Three considerations guide the selection of Qatar and Turkey. First, both have achieved high visibility in contemporary international diplomacy as active mediators. Second, they represent clear cases of state-led mediation pursued as an intentional foreign policy instrument rather than ad hoc humanitarian engagement. Third, analytically, they offer contrasting yet comparable examples of how non-Western states adapt to the erosion of Western dominance and the emergence of a more fragmented and multipolar international system. Empirically, Qatar’s involvement in Gaza-related negotiations and Turkey’s role in the Black Sea Grain Initiative and the broader Ukraine conflict provide concrete contexts for examining mediation strategies.

The analysis relies exclusively on secondary sources, including official statements, policy documents, speeches by political leaders, and international media coverage, supplemented by existing scholarly literature on mediation, small- and middle-power diplomacy, hedging, balancing, and regional security. The study adopts a careful, critical reading of these materials to trace how mediation is framed and justified by state actors, and how it is reflected in observable diplomatic behavior. The methodological emphasis is therefore interpretive and comparative, focusing on how political elites articulate mediation in terms of humanitarian responsibility, reputational gains, or strategic necessity, and how these discursive framings align with broader

foreign policy patterns and strategic choices (Burton and Carlen 2013). While reliance on secondary sources necessarily imposes certain limitations, this approach is appropriate given the article's focus on external representation, diplomatic positioning, and strategic signalling. Taken together, the comparative framework and systematic use of existing sources provide a coherent and empirically grounded account of how mediation operates as a form of strategic agency for small and middle powers navigating systemic change and multipolar competition.

## **Qatar's Mediation in the Gaza Conflict**

### **Domestic Foundations of Strategic Hedging**

Studies increasingly highlight the role of domestic-level variables (Dar 2025: 319) in shaping small states' adoption of strategic hedging strategies, including economic interests and domestic political considerations (Murphy 2017; Kuik 2021). Qatar's mediation and hedging strategies are closely intertwined with internal political dynamics. The ruling Al Thani family has used foreign policy, including mediation and humanitarian diplomacy, to portray Qatar as a principled and independent actor in a volatile region (Kamrava 2015; Ulrichsen 2013). Notably, mediation is enshrined in Article 7 of Qatar's Constitution, institutionalizing its role as a cornerstone of the country's foreign policy identity and strategic orientation (Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). This is especially evident in Qatar's consistent support for the Palestinian cause, which resonates strongly with both Qatari citizens and the country's large Arab expatriate population, particularly from Egypt, Palestine, and the Levant (Aras and Ansari 2024; Azem 2024).

In terms of economic interests, oil and gas security is another key driver. Qatar's co-ownership of the North Dome/South Pars gas field with Iran necessitates a stable bilateral relationship (Kamrava 2015: 65–66). The 2017–2021 Gulf blockade further underscored Iran's importance to Qatar's economic continuity, as Tehran provided vital trade and transit routes when Saudi Arabia and the UAE severed ties. In this context, Qatar's hedging is also a domestic insurance policy, safeguarding economic lifelines and aligning foreign policy with internal political imperatives. This strategy was further evident in Qatar's simultaneous deepening of ties with the US, culminating in its receipt of Major Non-NATO Ally status in 2022, while also hosting Russian officials in Doha. This highlights Qatar's effort to hedge between competing powers in a volatile global gas market (Ottaway 2022; Ulrichsen 2025: 4).

In contrast to fellow Gulf states like the UAE and Bahrain, which signed the Abraham Accords with Israel, Qatar has not conspicuously supported normalization. Instead, it has cited the lack of a just resolution to the Palestinian issue, a position that aligns with public sentiment and regional Arab opinion. Qatar adopts a dual-track approach toward Israel: it vocally criticizes Israeli actions in the Palestinian territories, particularly in Jerusalem and the West Bank, while simultaneously acting as a key mediator with Hamas and contributing to Gaza's humanitarian aid mechanism. This strategy allows Qatar to uphold its pro-

Palestinian stance while maintaining practical ties with Israel (Guzansky 2015; Guzansky and Marshall 2020).

### Regional Context and Hedging in Qatar's Foreign Policy

The Gulf region is a complex geopolitical landscape characterized by historical tensions, economic interdependencies, and shifting alliances. Historically dominated by a triangular power dynamic involving Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf Arab states led by Saudi Arabia (Buzan and Wæver 2003: 191), the regional balance was recalibrated following the fall of the Soviet Union, Iraq's decline and the rise of Iran and Israel as dominant actors (Parsi 2017: 11). By the early 2000s, the US, Saudi Arabia, and Iran emerged as the key poles in a reconfigured strategic triangle (Fürtig 2007: 627). Within this complex matrix, Qatar—a materially small but strategically ambitious state—has adopted mediation not merely as a diplomatic tool but as a strategic hedging strategy to navigate competing pressures from major powers and regional hegemony. Qatar utilizes its identity as a peacemaker to safeguard its national security in the volatile Persian Gulf region, which aims to minimize “the number of regional or global opponents Qatar might face otherwise” (Kamrava 2015: 542). Its foreign policy could be framed as a response to the “Lilliputian dilemma in a Gulliverian world” (Dar 2025: 318): a small state surrounded by regional giants like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and global powers like the US, it uses tools like mediation, soft power, and economic diplomacy to remain relevant and secure.

Drawing on Dar's (2025: 318-319) analytical categories of hedging strategies, Qatar's strategic behavior resonates most strongly with the second, third, and fourth categories. Its dual engagement with the US and Iran, support for Hamas, and pragmatic ties with Israel reflect hybrid hedging. Additionally, Qatar's “equidistant” posture toward multiple great powers aligns with the definition of small state hedging as relational simultaneity. Finally, its vulnerability to regional disruptions in energy supply, particularly through the Strait of Hormuz, makes it a quintessential example of issue-specific hedging.

Qatar's hedging is particularly visible in its dual engagement with both the US and Iran. The US-Iran relations are significantly intricate, shaped by “the interplay of historical contingency, intellectual discourse, normative values, cultural production, and strategic and geopolitical priorities” (Tazmini 2020: 473-474). This antagonistic relationship has profound implications for the regional order, particularly in nuclear non-proliferation, global energy security, and the Middle East's balance of power. Qatar hosts the largest American military base in the region (Al-Udeid) while simultaneously maintaining cordial relations with Iran, including cooperation over the shared North Dome/South Pars gas field (Kamrava 2015: 65-66). Economic ties, particularly during the Gulf blockade of 2017–2021 when Iran became one of Qatar's key suppliers, underscore Doha's pragmatic engagement with Tehran as part of a broader strategic hedging strategy (Trading Economics 2022). This stands in contrast to the more rigid alignments pursued by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, reflecting divergent foreign policy logics within the Gulf. This dual-track diplomacy

allows Qatar to mitigate security risks, diversify its strategic partnerships, and assert its autonomy without overt alignment. Such calibrated ambiguity is emblematic of small-state hedging, in which engagement with rival actors reduces dependence and increases resilience (Guzansky 2015; Medeiros 2005).

Tensions between Iran and the United States, especially in key transit zones like the Strait of Hormuz, have repeatedly threatened regional energy security. Incidents such as the 2019 tanker attacks (BBC 2019) and US sanctions on Iranian oil exports have contributed to volatility in global markets. Iran's regional influence, exercised through non-state actors in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, further complicates the security environment, challenging US interests and those of regional allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel (Ehteshami 2013: 181). The US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and Iran's closer ties with Russia and China have intensified fragmentation of the regional order, making Gulf actors' hedging behavior more pronounced.

Qatar's strategic hedging approach was starkly tested on 23 June 2025, when Iran launched missiles at the Al-Udeid Air Base in response to US strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities the day before. This marked a dangerous escalation in the Iran–Israel war and reflected the Gaza spillover into regional rivalries. Despite hosting the largest US military base in the Middle East, Qatar refrained from condemning Iran, opting instead for quiet diplomacy and calls for de-escalation. Its balancing act was tested again on 9 September 2025, when Israel struck Doha to target Hamas negotiators, killing six people, including a Qatari security officer. The attack, widely condemned as a violation of Qatari sovereignty, directly threatened its mediation efforts and underscored the risks of proximity to regional conflicts (Hokayem 2025). Together, these incidents highlight how Qatar's response to both Iranian and Israeli strikes reinforced its role as a small state navigating asymmetrical threats through ambiguity, diversification, and mediation. This mechanism of risk distribution and diplomatic resilience that sustains its agency amid geopolitical storms.

Qatar's restrained and diplomatic response exemplifies its strategic hedging posture: sustaining open lines of communication with rival powers, managing reputational risks, and leveraging its credibility as a mediator. This response also reflects the country's long-term investment in soft power, demonstrated through its humanitarian aid, diplomatic outreach, and high-profile mediation initiatives in Gaza, Lebanon, and Afghanistan. In contrast, Saudi Arabia remained largely silent, unable to position itself as a credible intermediary in the wake of heightened US–Iran tensions.

The Saudi-Qatari rivalry highlights divergent strategies in the Gulf. While Saudi Arabia pursued assertive policies, ranging from intervention in Yemen to normalization with Israel, Qatar sought to differentiate itself as a mediator and diplomatic hub. The 2017 blockade by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt was a turning point, prompting Doha to embrace diversification: it strengthened ties with Turkey, maintained pragmatic engagement with Iran, and reinforced its US partnership via the Al-Udeid Air Base and support for Afghanistan

initiatives. This multifaceted approach reflects Qatar's hedging logic, whereby small states under existential pressure preserve sovereignty and visibility by balancing alliances and avoiding overcommitment. Unlike Saudi Arabia's hard power calculus aligned with US-Israeli preferences, Qatar's mediation constitutes a softer, adaptive strategy rooted in survival and relevance. Its involvement in Gaza, Afghanistan, Darfur, Yemen, and Lebanon illustrates how small states use mediation not only to manage conflicts but also to navigate structural constraints and maintain influence within a fragmented international order.

### **Strategic Hedging and Qatar's Mediation in Gaza**

Seen through this lens, Qatar's mediation in conflicts such as Gaza becomes more than a normative or humanitarian gesture; it is a layered and calibrated form of strategic hedging that helps the state preserve autonomy, reduce risk exposure, and extend diplomatic leverage in a volatile geopolitical context. For instance, Qatar's partnership with the US during the Gaza conflict built on the credibility it gained during the 2021 Afghanistan withdrawal, reinforcing its role as a strategic hedger that leverages past mediation to sustain diplomatic capital with major powers (Alqashouti 2023: 73). Qatar's foreign policy strategy is framed within a volatile regional environment, where US support for Israel and Iranian backing for Hamas define the conflict's geopolitical poles. This strategy reflects the core logic of hedging: risk diversification, ambiguity, and adaptive alignment.

Qatar's ties to Hamas also reflect a calculated geopolitical logic. While countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE have normalized relations with Israel and distanced themselves from Hamas, Qatar sustains relations with all factions, enhancing its credibility as a mediator. By contrast, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's alignment with US-Israeli interests constrains their mediating capacity. This divergence underscores Qatar's hedging strategy—retaining flexibility and credibility in a polarized landscape. This approach allows Qatar to maintain diplomatic relations with a range of actors, including Hamas, the US, Iran, Egypt, and even Israel, without fully aligning with any single side. Qatar's ability to simultaneously host the US Al-Udeid Air Base and the Hamas political bureau in Doha demonstrates the dual-track nature of its diplomacy.

Moreover, Qatar's engagement in Gaza incorporates a strong multilateral dimension, which reflects another layer of strategic hedging: operating within the international system while subtly contesting its shortcomings. Doha has used forums such as the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and EU-hosted Palestine conferences to advocate for the two-state solution and amplify criticism of perceived Western double standards. Notably, Qatar supported international legal mechanisms during the war, including UN resolutions and ICJ proceedings. This was even though its main security partner, the US, vetoed Palestine's bid for full UN membership (Aras and Ansari 2024). This ability to critique Western-led institutions from within underscores Qatar's strategic positioning as both an insider and a challenger to the post-World War II international order. Furthermore, Qatar has invested significantly in humanitarian aid and reconstruction, often through Qatar

Charity, the Qatar Fund for Development, and direct support for Gaz’s civil infrastructure. In 2023–2024 alone, Qatar’s support reached more than 2.5 million Palestinians in Gaza through coordination with international agencies such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (ReliefWeb 2024).

Doha also exercises influence through media diplomacy, primarily via Al Jazeera, and multilateral platforms, including the UN General Assembly and the ICJ. It has pushed for legal accountability in Gaza, supported ICJ proceedings, and endorsed calls for a two-state solution—positions that challenge Western narratives while stopping short of full opposition (Aras and Ansari 2024). These actions illustrate Qatar’s insider-outsider posture within the international order: a state that critiques institutional bias without rejecting the system outright.

Qatar’s shuttle diplomacy, involving envoys moving between Israel, Hamas, Egypt, and the US, has produced limited but tangible outcomes, including temporary ceasefires and hostage releases. Coordinated closely with the US and Egypt, Doha has positioned itself as a key intermediary. Humanitarian aid reinforces this role, enhancing Qatar’s reputation and diplomatic relevance, though it also invites criticism and reputational risks. This reflects the logic of hedging: avoiding firm commitments while preserving maneuverability in a volatile environment. Qatar’s mediation in Gaza thus forms part of a broader soft power strategy spanning humanitarian aid, sports (e.g., FIFA 2022), and multilateral diplomacy. This enables Qatar to build influence and autonomy without reliance on military power.

## Turkey’s Mediation in the Russia–Ukraine War

Mediation has emerged as an increasingly visible and institutionalized element of Turkey’s foreign policy, particularly over the two decades of Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) rule. Since the early 2000s, Ankara has promoted what the then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (2000) termed a “proactive” or “humanitarian” diplomacy, centred on active engagement, conflict resolution, and norm entrepreneurship in Turkey’s surrounding regions. This approach aimed to move beyond the Cold War–era “status quo” orientation by portraying Turkey not only as a regional stabilizer but also as a middle power with an expanding global diplomatic reach (Aras 2014; Özerdem 2019). Initiatives such as the Friends of Mediation, launched jointly with Finland under the auspices of the UN; and Turkey’s mediation-related involvement in conflicts from Somalia to the Balkans underscore efforts to embed mediation within Turkey’s foreign policy identity (Aras 2019).

However, mediation in the Turkish case cannot be understood solely as an expression of normative idealism. Rather, it is embedded within a broader strategy of balancing. In contrast to Qatar’s hedging strategy, rooted in small-state survival logics and characterized by calculated ambiguity, Turkey’s mediation reflects the balancing logic pursued by a state endowed with significant military capabilities, alliance commitments, and regional ambitions. As Altunışık

and Çuhadar (2010) and Akpınar (2015) demonstrate, Ankara deploys mediation not only to signal humanitarian responsibility but also to enhance its indispensability within regional and global security governance. This dual character of Turkish mediation became more pronounced following the Arab uprisings, when, as Taşpınar (2012) observes, Turkey sought to preserve its formal ties with Western institutions while simultaneously carving out space for autonomous regional initiatives. Mediation thus operates as a diplomatic instrument of balancing: it allows Turkey to reaffirm its commitment to international norms while legitimizing its pursuit of autonomy and leadership across the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea region.

Turkey's NATO membership anchors it within the Western alliance through security guarantees, military interoperability, and institutional legitimacy, yet does not prevent Ankara from pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy shaped by asymmetric interdependence with Russia. Geopolitical proximity, energy dependence, and economic ties with Moscow generate both vulnerabilities and opportunities, pushing Ankara towards a strategy of selective balancing rather than rigid alignment (Aydın-Düzgüt and Tocci 2015). The controversial acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile defence system in 2019 epitomized Turkey's readiness to defy US and NATO preferences in pursuit of strategic autonomy. Meanwhile, cooperation in energy infrastructure, most notably through the TurkStream and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, illustrates how dependency can be leveraged vis-à-vis both Russia and Western partners (Aktürk 2020).

This strategic duality is equally evident in regional diplomacy. In Syria, Ankara engaged Moscow through the Astana process while coordinating with NATO in counter-ISIS operations (Stein 2022). In Libya and the South Caucasus, Turkey combined military involvement with diplomatic engagement involving Russia, including support to Azerbaijan in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. Taken together, these cases illustrate a pattern of "asymmetric balancing," in which Turkey manages its dependencies by cooperating with Russia when necessary while leveraging its NATO ties to offset excessive reliance on any single partner.

This structural duality shapes Turkey's role in the Russia-Ukraine war, where mediation functions simultaneously as an instrument of strategic autonomy and reputational signalling. It enables Turkey to avoid rigid alignment while preserving maneuverability between NATO and Russia. At the same time, initiatives such as the Black Sea Grain Deal, prisoner exchanges, and Istanbul talks highlight Turkey as an indispensable actor in regional and global security governance (Yanık 2023). Turkey's mediation thus reflects a balancing strategy rooted in asymmetric interdependence with Russia and institutional embeddedness in NATO, combining coercive capabilities, economic ties, and diplomatic entrepreneurship.

### **Multi-Level Mediation in the Russia-Ukraine War**

Turkey's mediation during the Russia-Ukraine war has operated at multiple and overlapping levels, ranging from humanitarian concerns to global governance and high-stakes power politics. The most high-profile and widely recognized success was the Black Sea Grain

Initiative, brokered in July 2022 with the UN's active involvement. By guaranteeing the safe passage of Ukrainian grain shipments through the Black Sea, despite the Russian naval blockade, Turkey played a pivotal role in averting a looming global food crisis. The deal carried disproportionate weight for food-insecure regions in Africa and the Middle East, where rising wheat and grain prices threatened humanitarian disaster (Elver and Akpinar 2022). In this sense, Ankara's role transcended bilateral mediation: it positioned Turkey as a critical global actor, linking European security to food security in the Global South. The initiative reinforced Turkey's capacity to engage simultaneously with Moscow, Kyiv, and the UN, underscoring Ankara's role as a diplomatic broker capable of commanding trust from rival parties.

Ankara also played a central role in orchestrating prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine. The most notable instance occurred in September 2022, when Turkey helped mediate the release of hundreds of prisoners of war, including high-ranking Ukrainian commanders captured in Mariupol (Suyundikov and Gokbel 2024). Such efforts not only yielded tangible humanitarian outcomes but also demonstrated Turkey's capacity to leverage its unique position by maintaining channels of communication with both sides to deliver concrete diplomatic results. These exchanges further strengthened Ankara's credibility as a mediator trusted by adversaries despite deep-seated hostilities.

Beyond these headline achievements, Turkey assumed a pivotal role by hosting direct negotiations between the Russian and Ukrainian delegations in Istanbul in March 2022. This encounter constituted the sole instance of high-level dialogue during the initial phase of the conflict. It underscored Ankara's capacity to provide a diplomatically viable platform when conventional channels under Western auspices proved either inaccessible or delegitimized. While the talks ultimately failed to yield a durable settlement, their occurrence in and of itself highlighted Turkey's convening power—its ability to engineer a rare moment of engagement between adversaries otherwise unwilling to share a negotiating table. In this sense, Istanbul was elevated from a mere geographical location to a symbolic locus of diplomacy, projecting Turkey's claim to indispensability as a regional mediator and reaffirming its strategic value within a fragmented and increasingly multipolar international order.

Taken together, these initiatives reflect a pattern: Turkey's mediation is deeply embedded in its broader balancing strategy. On the one hand, Ankara demonstrated solidarity with Ukraine by supplying Bayraktar TB2 drones, thereby reinforcing its NATO credentials (Akpinar 2022). On the other hand, Turkey refrained from joining Western sanctions against Russia, preserving economic and political channels while expanding trade and energy cooperation, including TurkStream and the Akkuyu nuclear plant (Mankoff 2022). This dual strategy illustrates Turkey's pursuit of autonomy within alliances—remaining formally committed to NATO while cultivating alternative partnerships to enhance strategic flexibility. Rather than aligning with either side, Ankara leverages its geographic and diplomatic position vis-à-vis both.

This pattern extends beyond Ukraine. In Syria, Ankara balanced engagement with Russia through the Astana Process alongside cooperation with Western counterterrorism efforts. In

the South Caucasus, Turkey's military backing of Azerbaijan in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war was followed by joint initiatives with Moscow to shape the post-war order (Hovsepian and Tonoyan 2024). These cases reveal that Ankara's role in Ukraine is part of a consistent repertoire in which mediation operates within balancing practices. In Ukraine specifically, Turkey leveraged mediation on food security, prisoner exchanges, and diplomatic channels to prove its indispensability to Western partners while sustaining ties with Russia, maximizing autonomy and reputational capital in a fragmented multipolar order.

Turkey's mediation in the Russia-Ukraine war exemplifies a balancing approach, combining firm institutional embeddedness in NATO with pragmatic cooperation with Russia. This approach involves integrating coercive capabilities with diplomatic engagement, and positioning Turkey as a regional stabilizer and an autonomous strategic actor (Yanık 2023; Wódka 2023). By deploying mediation in high-stakes conflicts, Ankara reinforces its indispensability to both Western allies and non-Western partners. In contrast to Qatar's hedging strategy, which prioritizes flexibility and ambiguity, Turkey's mediation reflects a more assertive balancing logic—one that aims not merely to manage risk, but also to shape regional alignments and consolidate strategic autonomy within an increasingly fragmented international order.

## Comparative Analysis and Conclusion

The cases of Qatar and Turkey demonstrate how mediation, far from being a neutral or altruistic practice, is instrumentalized by states with different structural positions to advance distinct foreign policy strategies. While both act as mediators in high-stakes conflicts, their approaches diverge in terms of the use of diplomatic versus coercive tools, strategic risk tolerance, and alliance-related constraints.

Qatar's mediation is shaped by soft power and reputational diplomacy. Doha emphasizes humanitarian aid, shuttle diplomacy, and multilateral engagement, projecting itself as an indispensable yet non-threatening broker. Its involvement in Gaza, which includes facilitating ceasefires, funding reconstruction, and engaging multiple actors, reflects a risk-averse hedging strategy rooted in limited military capacity and reliance on external security guarantees. Soft power instruments, including humanitarian assistance and media diplomacy, enable Qatar to extend influence without provoking confrontation. Turkey, by contrast, integrates soft and hard power as part of a balancing strategy that combines mediation with coercive leverage. Its military support to Ukraine, alongside mediation initiatives such as the Black Sea Grain Deal, illustrates how Ankara pairs hard and soft power to enhance its strategic autonomy. Embedded in NATO yet maintaining ties with Russia, Turkey leverages mediation to reinforce its role as both mediator and security actor.

The two cases also diverge in their approaches to risk. Qatar exemplifies caution and risk aversion, using hedging to preserve maneuverability and minimize exposure. Turkey, by contrast, demonstrates a greater willingness to assume risk, evident in its acquisition of the Russian S-400 system and selective non-alignment with Western sanctions, to expand

its autonomy. Whereas hedging seeks to reduce vulnerability, balancing involves actively managing and exploiting strategic tensions. Alliance dynamics further differentiate the two strategies. Qatar's dependence on the US security umbrella constrains its room for maneuver, limiting hedging within implicit boundaries. Turkey, by contrast, benefits from greater autonomy due to its military capabilities and strategic importance within NATO, allowing it to pursue balancing more assertively. Mediation thus serves as a tool for Ankara to justify and sustain this autonomy while maintaining ties with competing actors.

These contrasts delineate mediation as a strategic practice embedded in small and middle-power statecraft. Qatar epitomizes hedging, deploying mediation through soft power, reputational capital, and risk-averse diplomacy to ensure security and avoid entrapment in rivalries. Turkey exemplifies balancing, embedding mediation within a repertoire that fuses coercion, institutional activism, and diplomacy, using mediation as both material and symbolic leverage for regional leadership. Outcomes further underline these logics. Qatar's diplomacy has secured international recognition but delivered only temporary ceasefires and humanitarian relief, reflecting the fragility of small states and the limits of hedging. Turkey's approach has produced higher-profile initiatives, such as the Black Sea Grain Deal, that link regional disputes to global security and reinforce its indispensability to NATO and the UN. Yet balancing increases exposure: Ankara's rejection of Western sanctions, energy dependence on Russia, and the collapse of the Istanbul talks reveal the vulnerabilities inherent in high-risk brokerage.

Taken together, these cases show that mediation is not a neutral gesture but a deeply strategic modality of diplomacy. As performative statecraft, it operates simultaneously as conflict management, reputational signaling, and security-seeking. The divergent trajectories of Qatar and Turkey illustrate how structural positioning—small-state vulnerability versus middle-power ambition—shapes how mediation is deployed in an increasingly fragmented international order.

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## AI Statement

ChatGPT-5o was used by the authors to assist with proofreading and improving the phrasing and overall clarity of the manuscript.