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Qatar's Strategic Defence: Routinizing Cooperation with the US and France

Qatar has been formally strengthening defence cooperation with France and the United States, thanks to the Strategic Dialogue tool. In Doha's eyes, consolidating security ties with traditional allies is the best assurance vis-à-vis neighbours and the enduring boycott. Moreover, Qatar is working to upgrade its military capabilities, especially air and naval ones: partners are critical for expertise and knowledge transfer.

On the 11th of February 2019, Qatar and France signed in Doha a declaration of intent to establish a Strategic Dialogue in a variety of domains: defence and security, economy and investments, counterterrorism, health, education, culture, sports. Cooperation on regional security is also included, stated the French Minister for Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian and his Qatari counterpart, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani [*Gulf Times*, "Qatar, France, sign pact for strategic dialogue", February 12, 2019].

Qatar has just received 36 French-built Rafale fighter jets. In the new Gulf monarchies' approach to security, defence procurement encompasses know-how building for national military industry and for locals: this fosters security cooperation and, in the long-term, builds a conducive environment for interoperability. France opened in 2009 a permanent military base in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

In the meantime, Doha has been tightening the partnership with the United States, despite Trump's administration friendly and personal ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. On the 13th of January 2019 it hosted the second US-Qatar Strategic Dialogue, established in 2018. The first meeting (January 2018) focussed on trade, investments, technology, energy, education and culture; the second one addressed key-issues regarding defence and security.

Washington's Department of Defense and Doha signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to deepen coordination on potential expansion and support for US military activities at Al-Udeid Air Base

[*Airforce Technology*, “US signs MoU with Qatar to expand support at Al Udeid Air Base”, January 17, 2019].

Moreover, the United States and Qatar are widening maritime bilateral cooperation: the emirate aims to develop its expeditionary amphibious capability and to expand joint special forces. In 2018, the US Navy and the Marine Corps, with a Qatari naval delegation to the US, carried out amphibious exercises (Eastern Maverick) [*US Department of State*, “Joint Statement on the Second United States-Qatar Strategic Dialogue: Forward Together”, Media Note, January 13, 2019].

With regard to naval defense, Qatar wants to upgrade capabilities in patrolling and search and rescue: in July 2018, the Italian Fincantieri has started the construction of the first-Doha class corvettes for the Qatari Emiri Naval Forces. The contract includes four corvettes to be delivered by 2021, one amphibious vessel and two offshore patrol vessels, plus support services in Qatar for further ten years after the delivery [*Fincantieri*, “Fincantieri begins work in Muggiano on the first corvette for Qatar”, July 30, 2018].

Contrary to norm, the amphibious unit is conceived more as command and air defence centre, than for landing operations. The LPD (Landing Platform Dock) is based a design already prepared for the Algerian Navy (class Kalaat Béni Abbès), but its main function is to provide C3 functions for the new corvettes squadron, air defence cover (16 VLS Aster 30 missiles) and helicopter multi-role support (2 NH-90 ready on deck and 5 in hangar).

Doha strenghtens bilateral relations with the US and European allies despite the boycott imposed by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt. Conversely, the blockade fosters Qatar to seek for strategic partnerships with Western states, as well as with regional countries (Turkey and Iran), to better cope with a still uncertain Middle Eastern scenario, which requires not only allies, but also improved defence tools.

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